ABSTRACT

God Wills It: Presidents and the Political Use of Religion

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How have American presidents used religious rhetoric? Has it helped them achieve their goals? Why or why not? These are the main questions this dissertation attempts to grapple with.

I begin my study by developing a typology of presidential religious rhetoric that consists of three basic styles of speech. Ceremonial religious rhetoric is meant to capture those times when a president uses religious language in a broad sense that is appropriate for the occasion. Examples would include holiday addresses and funeral eulogies. I label a second variant of religious rhetoric comforting and calming. A president will frequently use religious rhetoric as he tries to shepherd the country through the difficult aftermath of a terrorist attack, a natural disaster or a riot. The final kind I have called instrumental. A president uses instrumental religious rhetoric when he makes an argument founded on religious concepts or beliefs in an attempt to convince interested parties to support a goal of his, such as passing a piece of legislation.

The majority of the project focuses on this last type. I propose a strict set of coding rules for both identifying when instrumental religious rhetoric has appeared and for gauging its possible impact. My measures of potential effectiveness focus on the president’s three most important relationships- his relationship with the public, his relationship with the media and his relationship with Congress. The eight case study chapters include analyses of Eisenhower’s calls
for increased mutual security funding, Carter’s rhetoric describing his energy policies and Clinton’s rhetoric about the impeachment proceedings against him, among others.

The limited number of case studies immediately yields an interesting finding: it turns out that presidents do not often make consistent religious arguments for their governmental objectives. Further, when instrumental religious rhetoric is used, presidents limit themselves to discussing certain issues where religion might be said to be naturally applicable—questions of national security, civil rights and scandal. As it is, two presidents, Truman and Nixon, never used a religious rhetorical strategy at all. Indeed, it appears that whether due to personal taste or political complications, almost all presidents are quite uncomfortable using instrumental religious rhetoric. Therefore, a crisis is shown to be a necessary condition for a president to engage in religious speechifying. The existence of a crisis seems to be needed to force many a president to overcome his reluctance to drape his goals in religious rhetoric.

The main finding of this dissertation, however, is that instrumental religious rhetoric is not very helpful to a goal-oriented president. In nearly every case, public opinion does not respond to the president’s religious pleas, the media reacts critically to both his ideas and his language and the reception of his proposals in Congress disappoints. This surprising conclusion displaces the results of earlier major studies of presidential religious rhetoric that claimed such language had a powerful force to it.

A final experiment was designed to explore the causal dynamics behind the findings of the case studies. Why does religious rhetoric fail? Is it because it is simply unpersuasive? Or, rather, is the explanation found in the context (i.e. crisis situations) in which such rhetoric has appeared? The experiment was designed to decide between these two competing hypotheses.
Student participants were given sample speeches containing either religious or secular arguments for a political goal. Treatments were designed to accurately mimic where and how religious rhetoric has historically been used. Results support the former interpretation; exposure to a religious policy argument has no effect on an individual’s opinion. Exposure to secular rhetoric is slightly more impactful but, regardless, ideology and partisan affiliation are far more important than either type when it comes to explaining opinions.

The religious dimensions of presidential leadership have been a constant throughout history, becoming even more visible in the post-war period. This dissertation greatly furthers our understanding of this important subject. It is valuable for anyone interested in either the challenges of presidential power or in the role that religion plays in contemporary American politics.
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To Mom and Dad
Chapter 1

Introduction

Everyone agreed that September 11, 2001 started off as a beautiful morning. Abundant, radiant sunshine. Not a cloud in the brilliant blue sky, almost like one of those old computer screens. But before rush hour was over the day would be defined by tragedy, and horror. Televisions in the afternoon shuttered between clips of twisted steel or smoking wreckage or collapsing towers. We all remember, even if we wish we did not.

By September 20, the American people had heard from President Bush on a number of occasions since the attacks. All of those earlier speeches had aimed to provide comfort and solace, and not to outline the Administration’s foreign policy response. This evening, in an address before a joint session of Congress, Bush would begin the transition.

While waiting for British Prime Minister Tony Blair to arrive at the White House, Bush took a brief nap. Blair and Bush then met alone in the Blue Room for around twenty minutes as the President reviewed the country’s developing military plans. Knowing the importance of the address Bush would shortly deliver, Blair was stunned by his counterpart’s preternatural calm. “You don’t seem the least bit concerned or nervous. Don’t you need some time alone?” Blair asked. Bush answered, “I know exactly what I need to say, and how to say it, and what to do” (Woodward 2002, 107).

Before an audience of over 80 million Americans, on this night Bush gave one of the single best speeches of his presidency (Bush 2001d). He began the heart of his address by identifying the enemy, al Qaeda, “a collection of loosely affiliated terrorist organizations” that
“practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics.” He demanded that Afghanistan’s ruling Taliban regime surrender all al Qaeda members living in their country and that the government forcibly close their training camps. He preached tolerance for members of the Muslim faith and he pleaded with Americans to grant him their patience for a prolonged struggle. But it was Bush’s closing lines that were truly exceptional:

Great harm has been done to us. We have suffered great loss. And in our grief and anger, we have found our mission and our moment. Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time and the great hope of every time, now depends on us. Our Nation—this generation—will lift a dark threat of violence from our people and our future…

The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them.

Fellow citizens, we’ll meet violence with patient justice, assured of the rightness of our cause and confident of the victories to come. In all that lies before us, may God grant us wisdom, and may He watch over the United States of America.

In truth, these last lines, combining overt invocations of God with a more subtly charged religious vocabulary (i.e. “mission,” “patient justice”), were not the only spiritual references to be found in the body of the text. Bush, for one, claimed that the terrorists’ main goal was “to kill Christians and Jews.” He explicitly told the public that they should pray, because “Prayer has comforted us in sorrow and will help strengthen us for the journey ahead.” The President even went to some lengths to integrate the concepts of patriotism and faith, visible in lines such as: “We’ve seen the unfurling of flags, the lighting of candles, the giving of blood, the saying of
prayers in English, Hebrew, and Arabic” (Riswold 2004, 41). Taking all this in mind, perhaps it is more than a coincidence that the military operation announced after this speech was originally code-named “Infinite Justice,” a phrase with strong religious connotations for Christians who believe that it is God who ultimately will judge both the living and the dead (see, for instance, Mt 25: 31-33: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”)

Whether because of its religious tenor or in spite of it, the reaction to Bush’s address was overwhelmingly positive. The New York Times reported that “tremendous public support for the president was reflected in the warmth of the reception he received on Capitol Hill.” The paper admired how “Mr. Bush rose to the occasion, finding at times the eloquence that has eluded him so often in the past” (Apple 2001). In a surreal scene in Philadelphia, fans at a Flyers-Rangers exhibition game demanded that play be stopped so that they could watch the speech on the Jumbotron in the arena. The third period was delayed for over 33 minutes as the players and fans viewed the broadcast from their seats. When the president finished, the teams engaged in an impromptu handshake line and then by mutual agreement cancelled the rest of the game, declaring it a tie. From a boisterous restaurant in Longmont, Colorado, Cyndi Morris captured the feelings of many of her fellow citizens when she told a newspaper “I believe God has sent us an ark in Bush. We’re all going to get through this together, side by side. I feel a lot better after hearing him” (McFadden 2001).
God is not neutral. Those are stunning words. And yet it was with this coda that Bush introduced a line of argument he would repeatedly return to over the course of his two terms: God supported America’s mission in the world. Freedom is a gift from God that should be shared. God agrees with our goals. God is not neutral.

This kind of religious rhetoric was predictably controversial. Just consider some of the angry reactions Bush’s language provoked over the next several years, from writers, scholars and ordinary citizens alike:

It is remarkable how closely Bush’s discourse coincides with that of the false prophets of the Old Testament. While the true prophets proclaimed the sovereignty of Yahweh, the God of justice and love who judges nations and persons, the false prophets served Baal, who could be manipulated by the power. Karl Marx concluded that religion is “the opium of the people”… How paradoxical, and how sad, that the President of the United States, with his heretical manipulation of religious language, insists on proving Karl Marx right. – Juan Stam, The Nation, 12/4/03

Many parishioners at my small, inside-the-Beltway church, by contrast, do not view themselves or the nation in such a saintly light… And Bush’s increasingly religious justification for the war with Iraq is disturbing, even frightening, to many. “It bothers me that he wraps himself in a cloak of Christianity,” said Lois Elieff. “It’s not my idea of Christianity.” To them, Bush’s use of religious language sounds shallow and far more self-justifying than that of other recent political leaders- including Bush’s father. – Rev. Fritz Ritsch, Washington Post, 3/2/03

They loved words like “evil.” One of Bush’s worst faults in rhetoric (to dip into that cornucopia) was to use the word as if it were a button he could push to increase his power. When people have an IV tube put in them to feed a narcotic painkiller on demand, a few keep pressing that button. Bush uses evil as a narcotic for that part of the American public which feels most distressed. – Norman Mailer, The Daily Telegraph, 2/21/03

That a president invokes the Almighty should no longer surprise us. But the danger of invoking God for any political or military purpose is the presumption that he is on our side. The lesson of history is that no
individual or nation is exempt from Divine judgment. – Kenneth Woodward, *Newsweek*, 3/10/03

Dubious at the time, the God’s-on-our-side rhetoric is looking even less credible now, after more than a year of frequently bad news for the president and his administration. Therein lies a lesson our political leaders would do well to remember the next time they’re tempted to invoke God for partisan politics, whether the cause is liberal or conservative, Democratic or Republican. Be careful, lest unfolding events make you and your pious claims look downright foolish. – Tom Krattenmaker, *USA Today*, 1/29/06

When we do look closely at Bush’s religious rhetoric, we discern anti-democratic features discouraging deliberation and dissent, as well as persistent opacity in its religious claims that are undesirable from the standpoint of many of the alternative conceptions of the ethics of public discourse that recent writers have advanced, as well as precepts of public reason advocates… these overlapping objections provide good grounds to conclude that Bush’s particular type of religious discourse is ethically dubious in ways that many other forms of public religious expression are not. – Rogers Smith, *Political Theory*, April 2008

Let me be clear, the inclusion of this commentary is in no way meant to imply any type of judgment or condemnation of Bush’s rhetoric. In many ways, for me at least, that normative question is beside the point. What this section is meant to illustrate, however, is the importance of studying presidential religious rhetoric in the first place. All of the individuals above are concerned because they presume that religious rhetoric matters, that it has some type of powerful credibility with the public. But that question, the more important question, has not been definitively answered yet. This is my attempt.

It is essential to recognize, though, that there was nothing altogether unique about neither Bush’s religious rhetoric nor the handwringing that accompanied it. History is littered with examples of presidents who claimed divine sanction for their agendas. In fact, the country’s first
president, George Washington, would voice sentiments very similar in style to those offered over two centuries later by Bush.

One of Washington’s major political projects was to construct anew a virtuous national character. Like many of the most prominent thinkers of his time, Washington believed that good government first required good self-government. The experience of the states under the Articles of Confederation had convinced him that a political system could be undermined by individual corruption, jealousy and selfishness. No matter how much the structural condition of the country would be improved by the Constitution, Washington believed the need for sound morals remained (Spalding 1999).

One of the ways Washington tried to inculcate these values was by the use of religious rhetoric. He started on this task in his inaugural address. Washington made “homage to the Great Author of every public and private good” and reminded his countrymen that “No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than those 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.” As such, Washington warned that “we ought to be no less persuaded that the 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” (Washington 1789).

The first president certainly acted as if he believed this to be true. On multiple occasions he warned the country that God might withdraw his blessing were they to be unjust. As Commander-in-Chief, Washington required his soldiers to attend Sunday services and ordered
that ceremonies be held on a variety of special days of prayer and thanksgiving. Washington said that by their proper observances the army might “incline the Lord and Giver of Victory, to prosper our arms” (Smith 2006, 45). In his farewell address, remembered more for its admonition against entangling foreign alliances, Washington made a coherent, final plea for the importance of good behavior to America’s future. “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness- these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity” (Washington 1796). The old General was trying to encourage a certain type of moral responsibility. Religious rhetoric, talk of “the propitious smiles of Heaven” and the “Giver of Victory,” was his means of doing so.

Another of America’s most revered leaders, Abraham Lincoln, also turned to religious rhetoric in support of his civil war policies. 1864 had been a bad year for Lincoln. To begin the year, the Union armies were defeated in a variety of marginal skirmishes. Still, entering the summer, the North was optimistic that the war was close to an end. Those hopes were soon dashed as U.S. Grant’s forces were consistently pounded over the following months, leading some to label Grant a “butcher.” Confederate troops once more threatened Washington in July. Morale sagged to its lowest point in the entire war as many influential Northerners began to speak of negotiating a settlement, even if it meant the Confederacy remained independent. But
Lincoln would accept nothing less than total victory, even, as he said, “if it takes three years more” (McPherson 2008, 209-263).

As a result, Lincoln’s own re-election was for a time in serious jeopardy. Sherman’s capture of Atlanta and Sheridan’s victories in the Shenandoah Valley secured it. Nevertheless, the war was yet to be won. Lincoln’s second inaugural, the shortest and most tragically beautiful on record, contained a religious argument for fighting to the end:

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 (Lincoln 1865).
It may surprise some that Jefferson, too, was not above, in the words of Garry Wills (1990, 372), using “religion as a political weapon.” Jefferson was a problematic religious spokesman. The third president rejected Christ’s divinity, virgin birth and resurrection. He thought Christ was a good man who had merely been caught up in the whirlwind of enthusiasm that surrounded him. Jefferson wrote in 1787 that Jesus was “a man of illegitimate birth, of a benevolent heart, enthusiastic mind, who set out without pretensions to divinity, ended in believing them, and was punished capitally for sedition” (357). Although conflicted, Jefferson was not quite sure of the existence of the afterlife. He composed his own version of the Bible by cutting out all the supernatural and prophetic verses and keeping only those he considered the best expressions of Christ’s moral teachings. The remainder of the Good Book was filled, he said, with “gross effects and palpable falsehoods.” These were unusual beliefs at the time to say the least, and one can easily imagine how damaging they would have been to Jefferson, were they ever fully revealed (Smith 2006, 55-69).

Still, despite being bitterly accused of atheism, Jefferson made regular reference to God in his public addresses, calling him variably “Almighty,” “Supreme Being” and “Intelligent and Powerful Agent” (59). And further, in advocating for the separation of church and state, Jefferson would also employ religious rhetoric. Many Americans believe that the phrase “separation of church and state” is found in the Constitution. It is not. These words instead originate from a letter Jefferson wrote to the Danbury Baptist Association in 1802. It was only over time, and perhaps as a result of anti-Catholic prejudice, that the idea came to be seen as representing the Constitution’s original intent (Hamburger 2002). It was nonetheless a principle
that Jefferson remained vigorously committed to throughout his life. If religious rhetoric could help him convince people of its validity, all the better. In Virginia, Jefferson was known to refer to one Biblical verse, in particular, Matthew 16:18: “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Wills 1990, 368). To those that felt religion would fail without state support, Jefferson responded that Christ had already precluded that possibility.

Washington, Lincoln and Jefferson are titans of presidential history, each considered among the country’s most skilled and effective leaders. All of them used religious rhetoric as it served their needs. The continuity of religious rhetoric, the prominence of it in presidential governance, when combined with its inherently controversial nature, make it absolutely imperative that we fully understand the role it plays in U.S. politics.

The truth is these tales are just the tip of the iceberg. In the case studies contained in this dissertation the reader will encounter countless examples of presidents delivering jeremiads, quoting Scripture, reciting the Golden Rule, creating martyrs for their causes, capitalizing on the proximity of religious holidays (both Christian and Jewish), referring to just war theory, calling for days of prayer, discussing the importance of mercy, forgiveness and brotherhood and so much more. The question is, why?

It is well known that over the past century the position of the presidency within government and society has been strengthened. The president has been allocated more staff, more power has been delegated to him and his role in the provision of national security has expanded. As a consequence, the public has become personally invested in the man occupying
the office, expecting him to deliver on all the promises he has made. In Lowi’s (1985, 115) words, “The personality of the president—perhaps we should call it the personhood of the presidency, regardless of the character of the incumbent—is a combination of Jesus Christ and the Statue of Liberty: Bring me your burdens. Bring me your hopes and fears. Bring me your search for salvation.”

Yet, as Lowi recognizes, the president simply cannot deliver on everything. He still operates in a system of separate institutions that share powers. The president may wish to nominate a judge to the Supreme Court bench or agree to a treaty, but the Senate must confirm the selection or ratify the agreement. The president can propose legislation, but Congress must dispose of it. The president can direct the executive branch, but the courts can use judicial review to strike down his actions. The president is Commander-in-Chief, but only Congress can declare war.

Herein lies Neustadt’s (1960) profound dilemma: formal powers do not guarantee power, that although we expect presidents to lead, the authority of the office guarantees nothing more than clerkship. Thus presidential power, Neustadt argues, is the power to persuade, the power to bargain, whether with bureaucrats, members of Congress or even a president’s own staff. The goal is to convince these individuals that what the president wants is what they want, too. The president has certain natural bargaining advantages— it is hard to say no when you are sitting in the Oval Office—but other actors have accrued advantages as well. At once, this is why these men and women are useful to the president, but also why they are capable of resisting him. Hence, from Neustadt on, scholars have been identifying various ways that presidents can
supplement their weak base of power, whether by use of executive orders (Howell 2003), public appeals (Kernell 1997; Canes-Wrone 2006), electoral mandates (Conley 2001) or even by means of their place in political time (Skowronek 1993).

The fundamental perspective of this thesis is that when a president uses religious language or imagery as a means of shaping the discussion about a particular policy he is making a strategic choice. He has calculated that this particular kind of argument, that claiming that God wills it be done or that God is not neutral, can improve his odds of getting what he wants. Religious rhetoric can be seen as a means of supplementing the weak institutional bases of power upon which the office of the president stands. When has this choice been made? Has it worked? Why? These are the main questions that I attempt to answer. President Bush’s rhetoric on the War on Terror, a case I discuss extensively in chapter eight, is just one small part of a much larger story.

Franklin Roosevelt once said the presidency was “preeminently a place for moral leadership.” And over three decades ago James David Fairbanks (1981) called upon researchers to finally consider the implications of the president’s “priestly functions” on his leadership possibilities. This call has regrettably gone mostly unanswered until now. We still do not really know what Roosevelt meant. I hope to help change that.

In addition to its contribution to the literature on presidential power, this thesis also fits nicely into a relatively new niche area of political science, the study of presidential rhetoric. The most famous of these writings is likely Tulis’ (1987) exceptionally well received history of the
rhetorical presidency. From my perspective, there seems to be two basic modes of work on presidential rhetoric.

On the one hand, many scholars have embraced the descriptive tasks involved in explaining the specific types of arguments and communications strategies presidents use. They seek to demystify themes, explain important images and highlight patterns of speech. These studies are incredibly nuanced, detailed and interesting. Martin Medhurst is very closely associated with this type of investigation, in particular his book on Eisenhower (1993) and the volume he edited on George H.W. Bush (2006). Other examples include Kiewe’s (1994) edited volume on the rhetoric presidents use during times of crisis, Chernus’s (2008) book on Eisenhower’s national security discourse and the collection of essays edited by Aune and Rigsby (2005) about presidential rhetoric on civil rights.

The possible flaws of this style are readily apparent. Too often this work is narrowly fixated on a speech or two at the expense of recognizing broader rhetorical outcomes. At times, it is weighed down by the jargon of dense communication theories. Rarely is it systematic or scientific in the more conventional sense.

On the other hand, another side of presidential rhetoric research has been more quantitative, more general and more abstract. For example, Lim (2008) laments the rise of what he calls “the anti-intellectual presidency.” Using Flesch Readability Scores, Lim shows how in the 18th and 19th centuries State of the Union addresses were written at a college reading level, while today they are written at an eighth grade level (31). In any speech, one is liable to find
more applause lines, partisan sloganeering and emotional cues than in the past. Lim is gravely concerned with the democratic ramifications of this dumbing down of presidential rhetoric.

Looking at a different issue, Cohen (1995) assesses the impact of presidential rhetoric on the public agenda. He matches variables that count the number of State of the Union mentions of economic, foreign or civil rights policy with Gallup data on the nation’s most important problem. He finds that as a president pays more attention to one of these types of policies, so too will the public.

As one can tell from these brief summations, this vein of research has a different set of limitations. It is more restricted in terms of descriptive material. Case studies can be cursory. State of the Unions and Inaugurals are regularly paid an excessive amount of attention at the expense of other presidential communications.

My hope is that this project melds together the positive attributes of both styles - the thoughtful and insightful dissections of presidential speech that Medhurst et al. is known for with more of the kind of rigor found in Lim and Cohen, especially in my experimental chapter. One of the great advantages this dissertation promises over both schools, however, is that I pay an unusual amount of attention to what the president says in minor speeches. Most work on presidential rhetoric, whether qualitative or quantitative, concentrates on major speeches. I focus on major speeches, too. Indeed, I consider them essential. But I do not ignore what the president says to smaller audiences and nor should the field. We know that contemporary presidents are more and more likely to go public (Kernell 1997). Each successive president speaks more in public than the one before. Thus the day to day communications of a president are a
fundamental part of his leadership strategy. I mine these local speeches for their rhetorical themes. Hundreds of individual addresses are cited. I feel that what is offered in these pages is therefore much more extensive than a good deal of other work on presidential rhetoric.

There are at least two works to be found within the discipline that share the same underlying theoretical approach towards the presidency and religious rhetoric and thus deserve extended comment. This study differs from each in important and significant ways. One of these like-minded explorations is Colleen Shogan’s (2006) *The Moral Rhetoric of American Presidents*. Like the analysis to come, Shogan’s book treats moral language as a strategic tool of the president, as a decision with “political consequences that can affect prospects for effective governance” (9). Indeed, her primary research question is essentially the same: “Are there specific political circumstances, apart from the historically pervasive characteristics of rhetorical genres, which make moral and religious rhetoric an effective tool for enhancing a president’s authority?” (12).

To answer this question, Shogan blends quantitative tests, in the form of a content analysis of State of the Union and Inaugural addresses used to predict the frequency of moral claims, with nine historical case studies drawn from the entirety of American history. Her conclusions are remarkably precise. Four conditions recommend the use of religious and moral rhetoric: when the president must quickly rally the public around a cause the nation is conflicted about, when the president is dealing with complex legislation that cannot be easily explained, when the president was elected on a platform that promised moral leadership and when the president is threatened by the prospect of Congress taking the lead on a given issue. In contrast,
the presence of three other conditions suggest that a president is better off avoiding moral rhetoric: when his party is divided, when he is suffering a scandal and when he has only weak political authority to begin with. When these sets of conditions conflict, as often they do, restraint is said to be the president’s best bet. The case studies include both successful uses of moral rhetoric as well as unsuccessful uses, proving that not all presidents have been able to perceive these boundaries.

*The Moral Rhetoric of American Presidents* is certainly admirable for its expansive ambition, the attention it pays to an overlooked topic, its use of mixed methodologies and its nuanced observations. That being said, this thesis is nevertheless a substantial advance from what Shogan has already accomplished for at least three reasons.

First, the vast majority of presidential research, including this study, recognizes and incorporates the traditional distinction between the pre-modern and the modern presidency. Shogan does not. She treats the rhetoric of presidents found in such diverse temporal contexts as George Washington, Theodore Roosevelt and Jimmy Carter (all three of whom are case studies) as part of one simple dataset, bearing enough in common that each can be treated as analytical equals. It is hard to justify this assumption, especially when it comes to the president’s public role.

For one, the president’s rhetorical responsibilities have been transformed over time. As Tulis (1987) has documented, in the early days of the American Republic it was not seen as proper for a president to directly engage the public. The Framers believed the experience of ancient democracies stood as an example of the dangerous consequences of demagoguery and an
over-reliance on popular opinion. Therefore, presidents valued formality, avoided discussing policy in their public speeches and addressed any programmatic suggestions to Congress alone.

It was Wilson, according to Tulis, who redefined the role of rhetoric in presidential leadership. Wilson believed that leadership and deliberation were mutually dependent, as opposed to being in conflict. As Wilson saw it, part of the president’s job was to interpret and explain opinion. This new thinking led to the emergence of the standards and forms of speech we are more familiar with today.

Similarly, Kernell (1997) explains how various factors have actually made it more productive for a president today to, as he terms it, “go public.” Kernell envisions going public as a tactic distinct from Neustadt’s presidential bargaining. A president goes public when he promotes himself and his policies with the aim of pressuring other Washington politicians into falling in line. Examples would be press conferences, televised speeches, White House ceremonies and the like. These activities are more like force than bargaining. No benefits are offered if a representative complies but costs are freely promised if they do not.

It used to be, Kernell claims, that certain elites—party leaders, committee chairs, agency bosses—had the power and flexibility to negotiate deals in private and then make the terms stick. However, this system has broken down. Parties have declined and narrow constituencies have developed in their place. Facilitated by various technological developments, members of the Washington community are now more than ever able to act independently. This has at once made bargaining a less appealing option for a president, for there are too many people he would need to trade with, while at the same time making going public more effective, for each member
is less insulated from the pressure. Kernell provides a variety of interesting data that illustrates the rising prominence of going public. So, whereas President Hoover averaged only a couple of minor addresses per year, President Clinton gave a minor address almost every other day (113-115).

At the same time, the apparatus surrounding the president has changed in such a way that it has afforded these men much greater power when making a rhetorical argument. Take, for example, the spread of television. In 1950, barely 10% of the population owned a TV set. By 1995, set ownership was universal and TV watching per household was 50% higher than it had been in the 1950s (Putnam 1995, 677).

Or consider the development of the White House speechwriting office. Harding, a phenomenally bad public speaker, was the first to employ a professional speechwriter, Judson P. Welliver. But Welliver’s immediate successors were not what we would consider a speechwriter today. Typically these individuals came from a background of law or academics, and they would advise the president on both substance and style. Examples would include Clark Clifford for Truman and Ted Sorensen for Kennedy. These men were very influential in the day-to-day operations of the administrations they served in. It was Richard Nixon, personally convinced of the power of rhetoric after his 1952 “Checkers” speech, who institutionalized a separate role for speechwriters that was disconnected from the policy process. Nixon located his new writing and research department in the White House communications office and staffed it with promising talent like William Safire and Pat Buchanan. Though some presidents like Jimmy Carter have been more reluctant to rely on the words of another than others, in general speechwriters have
since only risen in importance within the White House. Peggy Noonan, for instance, was able to draft Reagan’s moving 1984 D-Day address in Normandy (‘These are the boys of Pointe du Hoc. These are the men who took the cliffs.’) without ever having talked with the President about it (Nelson 2010).

Taking all of these developments together— the change in the rhetorical role of the president, the rise of public activities, the development of new technologies and institutions for public communication—must leave anyone skeptical of a causal argument based on comparisons between rhetorical strategies used in the 1700s and those used in the 2000s. Too much has changed in this area of American politics and society. I therefore limit my own investigation to the eleven postwar presidents.

Second, the qualitative aspects of Shogan’s work remain unconvincing because the attention that is paid to process in this section of her book does not match that found in the quantitative section. Crucially, it is unclear how Shogan chose her nine historical case studies. She provides no coding rules nor any explanation of the logic behind her selections. This could expose her conclusions to a variety of potential biases. Similarly, her judgments about when religious and moral rhetoric was effective are impressionistic at best. She never develops standardized measures to be used across all cases when making these decisions. The discussions of rhetorical strategies are also sometimes thin on evidence and examples.

As chapter three will make clear, this thesis tries to remedy these flaws. The case list I generate is comprehensive; it includes every major use of religious rhetoric that can be identified in the post-war period. Furthermore, every case that is included is included for one simple
reason- that being that it met the requirements of a very specific and theoretically driven set of criteria that had been spelled out in advance. Similarly, I determine which usages helped the president as opposed to those that hurt based on another set of carefully considered rules. This approach makes my qualitative work substantially more rigorous than Shogan’s.

And, third, Shogan does not do a very good job of connecting the quantitative and qualitative parts of her study. The regression analysis in chapter two takes a measure of the amount of moral/religious sentences in an address as the dependent variable and then estimates the impact on this statistic of a variety of different predictors, including the party of the president, their Electoral College vote and the condition of the economy.

Although thought-provoking, these models lend themselves to answering a slightly different question than the body of the rest of the text. Figuring out what determines the frequency of a given rhetorical choice is not exactly the same thing as determining its effectiveness. The significant findings, which are meager, do not really link in a meaningful way to the case studies that come next.

I avoid repeating this shortcoming. This dissertation also mixes methods, combining detailed historical inquiry with an original psychological experiment. However, the experiment instead builds on the case studies. The case studies are used in order to properly design the experiment so that it best mirrors how religious rhetoric has been employed throughout history. The issues where religious rhetoric is tested are the issues on which presidents have actually made religious appeals. The two elements of the thesis are thus critically interrelated.

The second book written from a perspective similar to the one developed in the pages
here is David Domke and Kevin Coe’s (2008) *The God Strategy*. By the term the “God strategy” Domke and Coe mean to signify carefully selected public communications that are utilized by politicians hoping to appeal to the deeply religious, as well as to the less devout who still value faith as a prerequisite for leadership. This strategy involves the use of a variety of different methods, including speaking in a language churchgoers can understand, fusing God and country, embracing religious rituals and practices and emphasizing certain moral issues. Although they trace its lineage to a somewhat earlier date, Domke and Coe argue that the God strategy did not truly emerge in American politics until 1980, appearing then in part due to the reappearance of evangelical Christians in the political process. Generally, the authors claim that the God strategy has worked best for Republicans, though they do point out that on certain occasions Democrats have tried to make use of it as well.

Given its focus on the presidency, on religious rhetoric and on the strategic use of religion, Domke and Coe’s subject matter obviously shares much in common with my own. Again, however, there are distinctions that must be acknowledged. For one, Domke and Coe view religious rhetoric primarily as a method of encouraging “members of the electorate to use their religious concerns as the decisive factor in voting decisions” (21). The strength of the God strategy is that it “goes far toward building and then maintaining an electoral base for a political party” (18). Domke and Coe are therefore highlighting the *electoral* role of religious rhetoric, how religious rhetoric impacts campaign and voting decisions. I am not. I am interested in the *executive* role of religious rhetoric, how religious rhetoric can help a president carry out his political objectives. What these men say while running for office will not be considered. This is
a study of presidential power, not of voting. And, as an aside, Domke and Coe’s focus on the electoral side of the presidential use of religion may be misguided to begin with. The authors fail to engage the extensive literature on how voters make up their minds, much of which suggests that the fireworks of a campaign have little to no bearing on the ultimate outcome anyways (see, i.e., Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960; Finkel 1993; Fiorina 1981; Key and Cummings 1966; Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1944).

A second important criticism of Domke and Coe’s research is that they far too frequently ignore the role of context in any individual use of religion. The vast majority of evidence that their book accumulates is composed of a series of bar graphs that depict such things as the frequency with which each president invoked God, the number of times a president used the word “crusade” or closed with a request for God’s favor, or even the number of times a president made reference to Christ (as opposed to a general religious sentiment) in his Christmas blessing. This is interesting as far as it goes. But it overlooks what the president was trying to accomplish when he spoke in religious terms. In terms of presidential rhetoric, the word “God” does not have a consistent meaning or purpose. Indeed, chapter two will show that in many instances there is simply no political objective at all behind a presidential religious statement. Rather, the president is trying to comfort or is playing a ceremonial role. It is not appropriate to overlook these differences.

And, third, Domke and Coe’s book is undermined by its normative biases. This can be seen in their habit of referring to religion as a “political weapon” as well as in the often over the top language with which they describe the “God strategy.” They call presidential religious
rhetoric a “grave risk (to) the American experiment in democracy” (140). It is “the recipe for hubris, jingoism, and the decline of democracy” (140). It is potentially “fatal to this nation’s future” (141). At one point, Domke and Coe even argue that clerical leaders must challenge politicians on their use of religion, thereby playing a similar role to the German religious leaders who criticized those Protestants that collaborated with the Nazis (148-149)!

This dissertation, in contrast, for the most part avoids making such normative judgments. My interest is only whether religious rhetoric is a useful tool or not. Does it even work? Again, it seems logical that we would want to know the answer to this question before we begin to fret about the potential consequences of the intermingling of religion and presidential activity. In the conclusion, I will, however, reflect some on the wider implications of my findings. But this thesis is at its heart a dispassionate and objective analysis, as I believe all good social science should strive to be.

To give an overview of what is to come, in summary, this dissertation will offer six essential conclusions:

**Not All Religious Rhetoric is Alike**

Part of my critique of Domke and Coe is that they appear unaware of the variation in the meanings and intent of different examples of presidential religious rhetoric. I, in contrast, argue that there are three unique kinds of religious rhetoric, each of which needs to be seen as distinctive. First, some religious rhetoric is merely *ceremonial*. The president is speaking in religious terms because it suits the occasion. Examples would be funeral eulogies and holiday blessings. A second type of religious rhetoric is designed to be *comforting and calming*. In
these scenarios, the president seeks to heal the country with a faith-based balm following events like a terrorist attack, a natural disaster or an assassination. Or the president turns to religious themes to pacify a distressed and angry country, to appeal to the country’s better angels. Finally, the third type of religious rhetoric is instrumental. A president uses instrumental rhetoric when he makes a religious argument to convince interested parties to support a personal or policy objective, such as passing a piece of legislation. While aware of the other types, the majority of this dissertation is an in-depth study of this last, strategic kind of religious rhetoric. And as far as that kind goes…

**Everybody’s Doing It… Except Truman and Nixon**

It is likely safe to say that *a priori* most readers would expect Richard Nixon to be one of the foremost practitioners of the strategic use of religious rhetoric. Despite his extensive and even moderately successful efforts at image rehabilitation post-presidency, Nixon is still by and large viewed as an unfortunate master of the dark arts of politics. In many ways, Nixon is remembered as much for his infamous enemies list as for his brilliant foreign policy triumphs. Resigning from office in order to avoid impeachment can tend to have that effect.

It would likely come as a surprise to many, then, that Nixon did not try to divide (nor for that matter unite) Americans behind his policies through the use of religious rhetoric. Based on the rules presented in chapter three, Nixon undertook eleven major policy initiatives during his almost six years in office. This is a reasonable amount of domestic activity for a president who admittedly preferred to devote his time to foreign affairs (Small 1999, 156). Yet, on not one of these polices did Nixon ever use what we would classify as a religious rhetorical strategy.
In a different way, Harry Truman is an equal surprise. Truman had a healthy agenda (eighteen initiatives) and was additionally a godly man. Yet, he, too, did not ever make concerted use of instrumental religious rhetoric. I will explain how these men did speak about religion, and perhaps why they did not use it strategically, in chapter two.

But They Aren’t Doing It Very Much

Although every president besides Nixon and Truman has at one time or another adopted a religious rhetorical strategy, no president has done so more than once. By this study’s count, the post-war presidents, collectively, had 144 major objectives that they tried to achieve. But religious rhetoric was the chosen means of argument in just 9 of these cases. In a deeply religious country where 91% of Americans profess a belief in God (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010, 66), where a majority claim to read the Bible at least two times per month (Prothero 2007, 38) and where 54% pray daily (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2011, 31), this is a surprisingly small amount of instrumental religious talk. Especially so when we consider the regularity with which the other two kinds of religious rhetoric appear.

In a way, presidents seem generally reluctant to “exploit” religion. Before an audience of magazine publishers in July 1990, George H.W. Bush admitted his own discomfort when it came to religious or moral discussions: “I’ll make you a slight confession: I still am trying to find the appropriate way to discuss, using the bully pulpit of the White House, these matters you talk about- talking about religious values, family values, or whatever. I think there is a danger that one can overdo it…” (Bush 1990b). Carter went as far as denying that he was the country’s spiritual leader. “Well, my own religious faith is one that’s much more personal… I don’t
consider myself to be the spiritual leader of this country. I’m the political leader,” he once said (Carter 1978b). Whenever Carter brought up religion he risked raising what his top advisor Hamilton Jordan called “the weirdo factor,” a reference to the fact that a great many Americans remained unfamiliar with Carter’s evangelical beliefs. Kennedy, likewise, was better served downplaying his faith as opposed to highlighting it. Kennedy faced a unique set of circumstances as the first Catholic president in a country that still was marked by substantial anti-Catholic bigotry. Why remind his countrymen of this fact by talking about religion? Even other presidents with more comfortable religious identities still had reason to be cautious. A president like George W. Bush, widely recognized and even admired for his faith, had to be careful to not to then be accused of abusing that image. These dilemmas are all discussed in much greater detail in the case study chapters.

Religious Rhetoric is a “Hail Mary” Strategy

An additional pattern that emerges from the historical case studies is that religious rhetoric is a tool of the desperate. The existence of a crisis appears to be enough to force many a president to overcome his reluctance to use religious rhetorical themes. In a number of the cases, including Carter’s campaign for energy legislation and Clinton’s appeals to retire the Lewinsky scandal, religious rhetoric marks a change in approach, turned to after other arguments have failed and the president’s position has seriously deteriorated. In another group, such as George H.W. Bush’s mobilization of the country prior to the Gulf War, religion is only embraced when the president’s drive has stalled and his goals are in unexpected jeopardy. In others, such as Ford’s defense of the Nixon pardon and Johnson’s campaign for the Civil Rights Act, an
untested new president immediately finds himself backed against a wall and turns to religion as a way out of a threatening situation. And, in others, such as Kennedy’s turn to a religious frame for civil rights following the violence in Birmingham, scary conditions on the ground added new urgency to the president’s agenda. The common thread for all of these cases is crisis. When opinion is falling, when a presidency is threatened, when the country’s fate seems to rest on the resolution of a problem, that is when we see instrumental religious rhetoric appear. That is the key variable helping presidents overcome their reluctance to use religious rhetoric.

**Religious Rhetoric Is Only Used on a Narrow Set of Issues**

Using religious rhetoric to push a tax cut, for instance, might be silly and misguided (especially since the New Testament is fairly clearly against the personal accumulation of wealth). Similarly, how is religion relevant to free trade or education or highway construction? It is conceivable that it is simply too big a leap for a president to try to make such a connection. So they do not. Another finding of this dissertation is that presidents are not very creative when it comes to constructing religious rationales. In fact, they only use instrumental religious rhetoric on objectives that fall in three broad issue areas, foreign policy/national security, civil rights and presidential scandals.

The linkage between religious rhetoric and foreign policy intuitively makes sense. Americans have long been committed to a series of beliefs ascribing to America a special, God-given role in the world. The Puritans sincerely believed they were a chosen people, a people with whom God had made a binding covenant, just as he had done with Israel, Noah or
Abraham. The colonies were explicitly established as his “city upon a hill,” a model for the world to emulate (Morone 2003, 34-54).

The phrase “city upon a hill” is actually Biblical in origin: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.” (Mt 5: 14). It entered into the American lexicon, however, in the form of a sermon given by John Winthrop in 1630 as he sailed aboard the Arbella, the flagship of the Puritan fleet. “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God’s sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God’s worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going” (Winthrop 1630). Not that there was anything riding on these settlements.

Ironically, this concept of American exceptionalism could lead to the adoption of opposing behaviors. On the one hand, being a chosen people is an injunction against engagement in the world, a call to remain separate, thereby allowing the world to follow America’s example as best it could. On the other hand, the idea also neatly blends into the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. In a narrow sense, Manifest Destiny is a term coined by John O’Sullivan in 1845 meant to capture the mission of the U.S. to spread across the North American continent. In a wider sense, though, Manifest Destiny means, as leaders such as Woodrow Wilson interpreted it, the divine mission of America to lead the outside world ever closer
towards perfection. This understanding has been the more common usage in the twentieth century (Stephanson 1996).

Regardless, the general belief that America has a providential role to play in foreign affairs, whether as example or leader, is a long-standing part of American culture and one that makes religious rhetoric about foreign policy both natural and potentially powerful. These ideas will be returned to in chapter eight.

Religious rhetoric is equally appropriate when it comes to civil rights. A good number of religious tenets deal with how individuals are meant to treat one another. Most famous of all, is the Golden Rule: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” (Mt 7: 12). It is not much of a stretch when Johnson uses this demand as part of his case for civil rights. Civil rights, like the Golden Rule, are fundamentally a question of equal treatment.

The language of religion, involving themes of sin, forgiveness and mercy, again, seems natural for presidential scandals. Religion can be the ready toolkit for an apology (or confession, if you will). Examples from the case studies include Clinton’s affair and Ford’s handling of the Nixon fallout.

**Religious Rhetoric Doesn’t Work**

The biggest and most important takeaway from this research is that religious rhetoric does not seem to help a president much, if at all. In almost all the historical case studies opinion does not respond to the president’s pleas, the media does not go any easier on him and the reception of his ideas in Congress disappoints. The experimental chapter will show that
exposure to a religious policy argument has no effect on an individual’s opinion. In contrast, exposure to secular rhetoric proves to be slightly more impactful. Evidence is also presented that suggests secular rhetoric is considered to be a stronger type of argument. But mainly ideology and partisan affiliation are far more important than exposure to either type of rhetoric when it comes to explaining policy opinions. The fact of the matter is that even the voice of God cannot help a president overcome the structural limitations on his power.

Chapter Overview

The body of the project is structured as follows. Chapter two outlines my typology for the three different types of religious rhetoric, including discussions of relevant examples that illuminate these classifications. I also explore in this chapter possible explanations for why neither Truman nor Nixon used instrumental religious rhetoric.

In chapter three I proceed to develop the theory behind instrumental religious rhetoric in more detail than that which is found in this introduction. I integrate existing research into a conceptual model that explains precisely why it is reasonable to make the hypothesis that instrumental religious rhetoric could be of use to a president. I also detail the methods behind the qualitative work. In this last section of chapter three, I discuss at length how cases were both identified and analyzed.

The case study chapters make up the next part of the dissertation. These chapters are grouped by issue area. The first set consists of foreign policy and national security issues. In chapter four I analyze Dwight Eisenhower’s four year religious rhetorical campaign for mutual security funding. In chapter five I detail Jimmy Carter’s religious rhetoric on energy policy.
Energy policy, particularly in the late 1970s, can be viewed as a national security issue, even if it remains somewhat different when compared to the rest. In chapter six I investigate Ronald Reagan’s religious claims for increasing defense spending.

Chapters seven and eight are the war cases. Chapter seven deals with George H.W. Bush’s rhetorical arguments in the run-up to the Persian Gulf War in the winter of 1991. The subject of chapter eight is the religious rhetoric Bush’s son, George W., used to mobilize the country behind his war on terror activities after 9/11.

I next turn to the civil rights cases. Chapter nine is a long chapter spanning two presidencies. Both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson used religious arguments in their attempts to secure passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. Given that Johnson was continuing Kennedy’s campaign for the same objective, I treat the two as one case.

The final two case study chapters concentrate on issues of presidential scandal. Chapter ten tells the story of Gerald Ford’s incredibly unsuccessful attempt at using religious rhetoric in order to persuade his countrymen to end their obsession with Watergate. Chapter eleven goes on to outline Bill Clinton’s efforts to avoid impeachment by means of religious argumentation.

Chapter twelve is the experimental chapter. In this chapter student participants are presented with a series of arguments, some religious and some secular, and then their response to these arguments is evaluated. Religious treatments, again, reflect actual issues where religious rhetoric has appeared and the language mimics that which presidents have historically used.

Chapter thirteen reviews the work and addresses its possible implications.
Chapter 2

Types of Presidential Religious Rhetoric

Clinton Rossiter (1987) has written that the modern presidency has five primary functions. First, the president is the Chief of State, the ceremonial head of the government and its most recognized figurehead. As the Chief of State, the president “greets distinguished visitors from all parts of the world, lays wreaths on the tomb of the Unknown Soldier and before the statue of Lincoln, makes proclamations of thanksgiving and commemoration, bestows medals on flustered pilots, holds state dinners for the diplomatic corps and the Supreme Court, lights the nation’s Christmas tree… and in the course of any month greets a fantastic procession of firemen, athletes, veterans, Boy Scouts, Campfire Girls, boosters, hog callers, exchange students, and heroic school children” (3). The president must perform these tasks both inside and outside of Washington and, while they may seem to be a nuisance to him, they serve to enlarge his prestige and power.

Second, the president is the country’s Chief Executive. The president is, in theory at least, in charge of the day-to-day operations of government. It is the president who is ultimately responsible for providing citizens with good, quality administration. He can appoint officials to bureaucratic agencies and he can remove some of these men and women when their performance disappoints him.

Third, the president is the Commander-in-Chief of the military. He alone directs the actions of the country’s armed forces and works to protect America from potential enemy attacks. Presidents such as Lincoln, Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt have turned this
Constitutional provision into an enormous grant of power. This clause has made possible a variety of actions that the Framers might have thought inconceivable—the seizure of industrial plants, the creation of emergency boards of authority and the forcible evacuation of thousands of Americans from their homes, to merely name a few.

Fourth, the president is America’s Chief Diplomat. Although the president shares power over foreign affairs with the Senate, he nonetheless tends to direct the country’s foreign policy. One needs only to consider the number of foreign policies named after presidents (i.e. the Monroe Doctrine, the Truman Doctrine, the Eisenhower Doctrine, etc.) as evidence. Through the State Department, the president negotiates treaties, recognizes governments, appoints ambassadors and communicates with other governments and their leaders. In truth, these powers often intersect with the president’s role as Commander-in-Chief.

Finally, the president is Chief Legislator. The president lobbies Congress for action on domestic policy concerns. When he does not like a bill, he may veto it. He can set the agenda through his Constitutionally mandated State of the Union address. And authority has been delegated to him explicitly for the purpose of proposing various pieces of legislation like the budget.

No one is likely to dispute the accuracy of Rossiter’s categorization. Given that the president must necessarily play these different roles, it therefore also makes sense to allow that he would use different styles of religious rhetoric as he shifts between them. Not all religious rhetoric is alike. That is a key finding of this dissertation.
In specific, I suggest that there are three different types of presidential religious rhetoric. The first is **ceremonial** religious rhetoric. In these instances the president uses religious language and symbolism because it is natural and appropriate for the occasion. Examples might be presidential addresses marking the observance of certain holidays, funeral eulogies and even the infrequent speech delivered from a church pulpit. This type of presidential religious rhetoric is noncontroversial. In fact, presidents are more likely to run into trouble if they do not use religious rhetoric on these occasions, something President Obama only recently learned.

The second type of presidential religious rhetoric is **comforting and calming religious rhetoric**. Here, the president uses religious themes as a means of helping the country through a difficult time, such as the aftermath of a terrorist attack, or a natural disaster or a space shuttle explosion. Alternatively, a president may appeal to religion as a way of stemming a national crisis. The president may try to speak to the people through their consciences in order to mitigate the tense situations that surround riots, assassinations and other moments of internal unrest. This second type of religious rhetoric is equally noncontroversial. Every president uses comforting and calming religious rhetoric at some point in their career.

The final type of presidential religious rhetoric is **instrumental religious rhetoric**. A president may use religious language to mobilize the public for a goal or objective, such as passing a piece of legislation, building support for a war or ending a scandal. In contrast to the other two types, instrumental religious rhetoric is often exceedingly controversial. When a president attempts to turn religion to his advantage, he often invites a public and media backlash.
Returning to Rossiter’s presidential functions, we can see why the first two types of religious rhetoric are unobjectionable while the third is not. When a president uses ceremonial or calming and comforting religious rhetoric, he is most commonly inhabiting his role as Chief of State. When a president acts as Chief of State, as Rossiter says, he “is the one-man distillation of the American people just as surely as the Queen is of the British people; he is, in President Taft’s words, ‘the personal embodiment and representative of their dignity and majesty’” (4). Chief of State is a unifying, symbolic role. The president’s grandeur and statesmanship is a reminder of what the country shares—its common beliefs, values and experiences. Nothing the president does as Chief of State typically sparks any opposition. When is the last time someone thought to criticize the president for remarks he made at a memorial service? It is almost impossible to think of an example.

On the other hand, when the president uses instrumental religious rhetoric he is more likely inhabiting his other roles, particularly Chief Executive and Chief Legislator. These roles are inherently conflictual. There are tangled lines of authority running between the president and Congress, there are differences of opinion about what can and should be done. Rossiter argues that, with respect to the role of Chief Executive, “the president (and I mean any president, no matter how happily he may wallow in the details of administration) has more trouble playing this role successfully than he does any of the others” (5). Likewise, the president quickly finds that his responsibilities as Chief Legislator are “difficult and delicate” (16). It is logical that anything the president says while acting under the guise of these other roles will be met with skepticism.
The majority of the dissertation is dedicated to the study of instrumental religious rhetoric. How one can identify and evaluate this style of language is the subject of chapter three. However, before turning to these important topics, it is useful to first explore some of the historical junctures where presidents have used ceremonial and comforting and calming religious rhetoric. The chapter will later conclude with a discussion of the only two presidents, Truman and Nixon, who did not use instrumental religious rhetoric. I will offer some thoughts about how these leaders used religious rhetoric, if not instrumentally, and why they might have been reluctant to go any further than they did.

Ceremonial Religious Rhetoric

Unsurprisingly, presidential religious rhetoric often accompanies a variety of both religious and quasi-religious holidays. Christmas is an obvious case in point. Perhaps no better example can be found of a religiously inspired Christmas address than Reagan’s speech to the nation just two days before Christmas 1981 (Reagan 1981d). Reagan had ostensibly asked the networks for time to discuss events currently unfolding in Poland. The Polish Communist leadership had launched a crackdown in mid-December on the incipient Solidarity movement, imposing martial law throughout the country. Reagan used this speech to announce a set of concrete economic sanctions against the Polish government. But Reagan also chose to extensively discuss what the Christmas holiday meant to him:

At this special time of year, we all renew our sense of wonder in recalling the story of the first Christmas in Bethlehem, nearly 2,000 year ago.

Some celebrate Christmas as the birthday of a great and good philosopher and teacher. Others of us believe in the divinity of the child born in Bethlehem, that he was and is the promised Prince of Peace. Yes, we’ve
questioned why he who could perform miracles chose to come among us as a helpless babe, but maybe that was his first miracle, his first great lesson that we should learn to care for one another.

Tonight, in millions of American homes, the glow of the Christmas tree is a reflection of the love Jesus taught us. Like the shepherds and wise men of that first Christmas, we Americans have always tried to follow a higher light, a star, if you will. At lonely campfire vigils along the frontier, in the darkest days of the Great Depression, through war and peace, the twin beacons of faith and freedom have brightened the American sky. At times our footsteps may have faltered, but trusting in God’s help, we’ve never lost our way.

Just across the way from the White House stand the two great emblems of the holiday season: a Menorah, symbolizing the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, and the National Christmas Tree, a beautiful towering blue spruce from Pennsylvania. Like the National Christmas Tree, our country is a living, growing thing planted in rich American soil. Only our devoted care can bring it to full flower. So, let this holiday season be for us a time of rededication.

Before ending the address, Reagan expanded on these sentiments, observing “Christmas means so much because of one special child. But Christmas also reminds us that all children are special, that they are gifts from God, gifts beyond price that mean more than any presents money can buy. In their love and laughter, in our hopes for their future lies the true meaning of Christmas.” Clearly the President made an effort to be inclusive, offering a nod to Jewish Americans when he referenced the White House Menorah. Still, Reagan’s comments were remarkable for their strong Christian emphasis. It is somewhat unusual to hear a president talk to the country about what “Jesus taught us” and to compare America to a Christmas tree. It is perhaps because of its overt embrace of Christianity that this address has become a favorite of the portion of conservatives who decry the existence of what they term a “war on Christmas.”
However, presidents do not hesitate to use religious rhetoric to mark the holidays of other faiths, either. For instance, George W. Bush instituted a tradition of hosting an Iftaar dinner at the White House, a tradition that Barack Obama has continued. The dinner’s purpose is to celebrate Ramadan, the Islamic holy month. The Iftaar is the evening meal that breaks the day of fasting. Often Muslims choose to eat together as a community after the sun has set. Bush and Obama have regularly made brief remarks during this dinner where they discuss the precepts of Islam and the commonalities that all religious Americans share. Bush was known to at times cite the Koran in his speeches (for an example, see Bush 2008).

Presidents also are willing to use religious rhetoric on holidays that are not strictly religious but nonetheless have religious overtones. One example would be Thanksgiving Day addresses. At several points in history presidents have turned Thanksgiving into an opportunity for instrumental religious rhetoric. The reader will encounter evidence of this in the case study chapters on Lyndon Johnson and George H.W. Bush. At other times, though, the religious rhetoric merely serves to commemorate the day. A message Johnson broadcast to the troops on Thanksgiving Day 1964 provides a fitting illustration (Johnson 1964u). In his speech, Johnson repeatedly stressed the religious dimensions of Thanksgiving. He opened by claiming that “Today all Americans thank the blessings of the Lord for the bounty of their land. In homes at peace, in houses of worship that are untouched by rancor or anger, families are gathered in gratitude for all that God has given them and for the blessings that He has rained upon our Nation.” Johnson continued to say that the first pilgrims “thanked in sincere joy the God who had permitted them to survive the year and reap the harvest, and brought them to a place where a
man could hope to be free.” The Commander-in-Chief further explained to his soldiers that “the rewards of the world are at the mercy of that just Providence who has thus far seen fit to bless this land.” It for this reason, Johnson concluded, “that we give thanks and pray that we may continue to deserve His blessings.” Johnson had thereby transformed a holiday that for a lot of Americans has much more to do with food, football and family into a profoundly spiritual event.

In a similar way, Memorial Day presidential addresses often feature ceremonial religious rhetoric. In his Memorial Day address just last year, for instance, Barack Obama chose to cite Isaiah 6: 8: “When I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here I am. Send me!’” (Obama 2011b). According to the President, that verse captures the very essence of Memorial Day: “That’s what we memorialize today. That spirit that says, send me, no matter the mission. Send me, no matter the risk. Send me, no matter how great the sacrifice I am called to make.”

As it is, holidays are not the only occasions where ceremonial religious rhetoric can be expected. The president participates in a wide variety of other events that also lend themselves to the use of this type of religious rhetoric. For one, presidents are from time to time called to deliver eulogies at the funerals of distinguished Americans. These services, taking place in religious buildings, are natural settings for ceremonial religious rhetoric.

A notable instance of a presidential eulogy might be Richard Nixon’s tribute to Dwight Eisenhower at the latter man’s funeral in March of 1969 (Nixon 1969). Nixon had been Ike’s vice president but the two had a tense and somewhat adversarial relationship. Eisenhower did grave damage to Nixon’s presidential aspirations in 1960 when, upon being asked to name a
contribution Nixon had made to his administration, he had responded “If you give me a week, I might think of one” (Genovese 1990, 4) That being said, the new president gave a touching and fitting tribute to his old boss. Nixon testified to Eisenhower’s kind demeanor, his love for family and his immeasurable historical impact. But what Nixon spoke most about was Eisenhower’s faith. Nixon told the crowd that Eisenhower was “a man of deep faith who believed in God and trusted in His will.” Nixon claimed that Eisenhower’s “great love of people was rooted in his faith. He had a deep faith in the goodness of God and in the essential goodness of man as a creature of God.” Eisenhower was a humble man, Nixon said, because “His was the humility of man before God and before the truth.” Eisenhower’s very “greatness” was “derived not from his office, but from his character, from a unique moral force that transcended national boundaries.” Nixon went on, “His life reminds us that there is a moral force in this world more powerful than the might of arms or the wealth of nations. This man who led the most powerful armies that the world has ever seen, this man who led the most powerful nation in the world, this essentially good and gentle and kind man- that moral force was his greatness.” Eisenhower’s funeral was a state funeral held for a political and military leader. Yet Nixon focused extensively on Eisenhower’s spirituality, rather than his political or military accomplishments. In fact, Nixon left the distinct impression that those accomplishments were only possible because of Eisenhower’s spirituality.

Funerals are not the only time that presidents find themselves speaking from a church pulpit. Whenever this happens, it is normal for a president to use religious rhetoric. Many readers will recall Bill Clinton’s address to the convocation of the Church of God in Christ in
Memphis, TN in November 1993 (Clinton 1993). This speech attracted great attention because Clinton channeled Martin Luther King Jr. in his remarks. The Mason Temple was the site of King’s last sermon, given on the eve of his assassination in April 1968. King had told the parishioners that he had been to the “mountaintop,” that he had seen the Promised Land, and that although he could not be sure he would make it there with them, he knew that deliverance was near. Speaking from the same rostrum as King, Clinton asked if the slain civil rights leader were to “reappear by my side today and give us a report card on the last 25 years, what would he say?” Clinton speculated that King would be proud of the country’s achievements expanding voting rights and economic opportunity, but at the same time he would be dismayed by the chronic problems of gang violence, drug abuse and teen pregnancy. As Clinton said, “The freedom to do that kind of thing is not what Martin Luther King lived and died for.” It really was a striking speech, one it is hard to envision many other presidents being able to pull off. Through it all, Clinton sprinkled his text with religious references. Clinton cited Proverbs when he proclaimed “‘A happy heart doeth good like medicine, but a broken spirit dryeth the bone.’ This is a happy place, and I’m happy to be here.” He referred to a well known passage in Matthew 5 when he exhorted the congregation to come together to improve their own community. “Scripture says,” Clinton observed, “you are the salt of the Earth and the light of the world, that if your light shines before men they will give glory to the Father in heaven. That is what we must do.” Finally, Clinton finished with a plea for the help of both the members in attendance, but also God: “So in this pulpit, on this day, let me ask all of you in your heart to say: We will honor the life and the work of Martin Luther King. We will honor the meaning of our church. We will,
somehow, by God’s grace, we will turn this around. We will give these children a future. We will take away their guns and give them books. We will take away their despair and give them hope. We will rebuild the families and the neighborhoods and the communities. We won’t make all the work that has gone on here benefit just a few. We will do it together by the grace of God."

In addition to their appearances in churches, presidents find it easy to employ ceremonial religious rhetoric at a multitude of other spiritual gatherings held throughout the year at the White House, in particular at the annual National Prayer Breakfast. Presidents regularly use this get-together as an opportunity to ruminate about the meaning of God in their own lives. Chapter five will discuss how Jimmy Carter became a little more guarded when it came to his personal beliefs following some embarrassing missteps he made during the 1976 campaign. However, one place he let his guard down about religion was at the breakfast. At his first prayer breakfast as president in 1977, Carter provided a lengthy disquisition on the importance of humility in American life (Carter 1977a). Carter told his audience that he originally wanted to include a verse from Second Chronicles (7: 14) in his inaugural address: “If my people who are called by my name shall humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from Heaven and forgive their sins and heal their land.” Carter acknowledged that his staff was troubled by this impulse. As Carter told it, “they came to me en masse and said, ‘The people will not understand that verse. It’s as though you, being elected President, are condemning the other people of our country, putting yourself in the position of Solomon and saying that all Americans are wicked.’” So Carter substituted in a replacement from Micah. Yet
Carter regretted the change because he felt the country needed to be reminded that it is capable of- and has committed- sin in the past and that Christ forcefully warned people against thinking otherwise:

And I think this episode, which is true, is illustrative of the problem that we face. Sometimes we take for granted that an acknowledgment of sin, an acknowledgment of the need for humility permeates the consciousness of our people. But it doesn’t. But if we know that we can have God’s forgiveness as a person, I think as a nation it makes it much easier for us to say, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner,’ knowing that the only compensation for sin is condemnation. Then we just can’t admit an error or a weakness or a degree of hatred or forgo pride. We as individuals- and we as a nation- insist that we are the strongest and the bravest and the wisest and the best. And in that attitude, we unconsciously, but in an all-pervasive way, cover up and fail to acknowledge our mistakes and in the process forgo an opportunity constantly to search for a better life or a better country.

Paul Tillich said that religion is a search for a closer relationship with God and our fellow man, and when we lose the inclination to search, to a great degree we lose our own religion.

As those of us who are Christians know, the most constantly repeated admonition from Christ was against pride. Sometimes it’s easier for us to be humble as individuals than it is for us to admit that our Nation makes mistakes.

Carter had used the prayer breakfast to call on the leaders in attendance to acknowledge America’s mistakes and, in so doing, to become better representatives of God’s grace. “If we, as leaders of our Nation, can search out and extract and discern and proclaim a new spirit, derived not from accumulated goodness or badness of people, which is only equal to individual goodness or badness- not even to the noble concept of our Nation, which is superlative, without doubt- but from the ultimate source of goodness and kindness and humility and love- and that’s from God- then we can indeed be good leaders and servants,” Carter said. He continued, “We can indeed be
strong enough and sure enough to admit our sinfulness and our mistakes. We can indeed be constantly searching for a way to rectify our errors and let our Nation exemplify what we as individuals ought to be in the eyes of God.” In this speech, one can easily see that Carter was preaching to the nation long before his “malaise” speech in July 1979, a speech that will be covered in detail later in chapter five.

It is being argued that the religious rhetoric presidents commonly use on holidays, at funerals, in churches and at prayer breakfasts is best classified as ceremonial. This rhetoric is entirely appropriate given the context and draws little notice. It seems natural. The record will show that presidents are more likely to run into trouble if they avoid religion on these occasions than if they decide to embrace it. To wit, Barack Obama’s recent Thanksgiving Day address to the nation did not mention God. Obama’s omission sparked a little noticed but nevertheless all-too-real controversy as the President soon found himself under fire from various newspaper columnists and Fox News television commentators (Stein 2011). Sherman Frederick (2011) of the Las Vegas Review-Journal was one of the President’s most vocal critics. Frederick wrote that “There’s a hateful horde of anti-religion zealots in this country who’d love nothing more than to punch … anyone else who dares mention God- right in the nose.” For Sherman, these feelings crystallized when he learned that Obama, presumably a man whom Sherman believes qualifies as one of those anti-religion zealots, had not talked about God in his Thanksgiving speech. Sherman fumed, “Leaving aside the utter strangeness of our president calling the meaning of the first Thanksgiving a ‘celebration of community,’ I wrote on Thanksgiving morning that the omission of God from the speech seemed odd. ‘Somebody ought to remind
Obama (and his speechwriter) that when Americans sit down around a meal today and give thanks, they give thanks to God.”

The ceremonial variant of presidential religious rhetoric is the kind that most closely resembles what sociologist Robert Bellah (1967) has called America’s civil religion. Some of the territory is certainly the same; Bellah also wrapped holidays like Thanksgiving and Memorial Day into his own theoretical construct. Borrowing a bit from Rousseau, Bellah sought to identify and describe the religious contours of American political life. Presidents and other public figures discuss God on solemn occasions, Bellah argued, because they are drawing from the “common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share” (3). The American civil religion has its own set of sacred scriptures (the Declaration, the Constitution, etc.) and its own collection of sacred figures (Washington, the American Moses, Lincoln, the American Jesus, and so on). Its temples and shrines are places like Gettysburg and Arlington National Cemetery.

Parts of the civil religion find their origin in Christianity, but it remains neither Christian nor sectarian. In fact, Bellah sees a “quite clear division of function between the civil religion and Christianity” (8). And here is where my concept of ceremonial religious rhetoric and Bellah’s concept of civil religion diverge. Ceremonial religious rhetoric is instead posited to be sectarian and quite frequently Christian. Ceremonial religious rhetoric does not concern itself with quasi-sacred figures like Washington or Lincoln- it concerns itself with truly sacred figures like Moses and Jesus. Ceremonial religious rhetoric is best thought of not as evidence for the
existence of some vaguely defined civil religion, but instead as plain old religion, used for civil purposes.

**Comforting and Calming Religious Rhetoric**

I have labeled a second type of presidential religious rhetoric comforting and calming. In these cases, a president employs religious language in a sincere attempt to shepherd the country through moments of national trauma. It must immediately be acknowledged that this is an incredibly valuable social function for presidential religious rhetoric. Research has documented a plethora of psychic benefits that religion has for people undergoing challenging times. For instance, a recent meta-analysis has shown that greater religiousness is associated with the onset of fewer symptoms of depression. The association was found to be even stronger for people who at the time reported feeling stressed by events in their lives (Smith, McCullough and Poll 2003). Similarly, religion serves as a protective barrier against suicide. A review of the research on this topic discovered that studies have consistently proved that intensity of religious commitment is associated with lower levels of suicidal behavior, irrespective of denomination. In part this finding can be attributed to the fact that most religions articulate strong moral and theological objections to suicide (Gearing and Lizardi 2008). At the same time, a third review documented that religion and spirituality are also typically beneficial to people dealing with the aftermath of a traumatic experience. Religiosity can even help produce “posttraumatic growth,” where an individual later makes positive changes in their lifestyle and priorities (Shaw, Joseph and Linley 2005). When the conclusions of this body of research are taken into proper consideration, it might not be much of an exaggeration to say that when a president speaks about religion during
dark times, when he makes religious beliefs more salient for the public in these crucial hours, he maybe saves lives.

Bill Clinton’s speech at the memorial service for victims of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building bombing in Oklahoma City is a poignant exemplar of this second type of religious rhetoric (Clinton 1995). Alternately labeling the bombing “evil” and “a terrible sin,” Clinton tried to provide solace for the families in attendance, though he lamented that “your pain is unimaginable, and we know that. We cannot undo it. That is God’s work.” But Clinton also addressed his remarks to the nation at large, as he spoke about what everyone might learn from the tragedy. In so doing, Clinton cited St. Paul, the Psalms, alluded to Proverbs 11: 29 (“Those who trouble their households will inherit wind, and the fool will be servant to the wise”) and made reference to a variety of other significant religious beliefs:

To all my fellow Americans beyond this hall, I say, one thing we owe those who have sacrificed is the duty to purge ourselves of the dark forces which gave rise to this evil. They are forces that threaten our common peace, our freedom, our way of life.

Let us teach our children that the God of comfort is also the God of righteousness. Those who trouble their own house will inherit the wind. Justice will prevail.

Let us let our own children know that we will stand against the forces of fear. When there is talk of hatred, let us stand up and talk against it. When there is talk of violence, let us stand up and talk against it. In the face of death, let us honor life. As St. Paul admonished us, let us not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

Yesterday Hillary and I had the privilege of speaking with some children of other Federal employees, children like those who were lost here. And one little girl said something we will never forget. She said we should all plant a tree in memory of the children. So this morning before we got on the plane to come here, at the White House, we planted that tree in honor of the
children of Oklahoma. It was a dogwood with its wonderful spring flower and its deep, enduring roots. It embodies the lesson of the Psalms that the life of a good person is like a tree whose leaf does not wither.

My fellow Americans, a tree takes a long time to grow, and wounds take a long time to heal. But we must begin. Those who are lost now belong to God. Some day we will be with them. But until that happens, their legacy must be our lives.

Thank you all, and God bless you.

Clinton’s successor, George W. Bush, would gain far more experience than any president should have ministering to a shaken country. Bush also used religious rhetoric to help America heal. Bush’s tendency to use comforting and calming religious rhetoric was established immediately on evening of September 11, 2001, when in a brief national address the President called to mind one of the most famous verses of Scripture (Bush 2001b). With visibly red eyes, Bush said “And I pray they will be comforted by a power greater than any of us, spoken through the ages in Psalm 23: ‘Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.’”

Bush followed his remarks on the night of the attacks with an extraordinary address he gave at a memorial service at the National Cathedral three days later (Bush 2001c). On this sad day of prayer and remembrance, Bush delivered nothing short of a presidential sermon. Bush knew that many Americans were questioning how a just and merciful God could have allowed so many innocent people to die in an act of senseless violence. Bush told the crowd that he understood these doubts, remarking “In many of our prayers this week, there is a searching and an honesty. At St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York on Tuesday, a woman said, ‘I prayed to God to give us a sign that He is still here.’ Others have prayed for the same, searching hospital to
hospital, carrying pictures of those still missing.” Bush assured everyone that God, indeed, was still with us, that he would continue to be with us. “God’s signs are not always the ones we look for,” Bush explained, “We learn in tragedy that his purposes are not always our own. Yet, the prayers of private suffering, whether in our homes or in this great cathedral, are known and heard and understood.” As such, the President promised that God would protect and care for us: “This world He created is of moral design. Grief and tragedy and hatred are only for a time. Goodness, remembrance, and love have no end. And the Lord of life holds all who die and all who mourn.” Thus, Bush asked that Americans be “assured, neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, can separate us from God’s love.”

Bush would use comforting and calming religious rhetoric to ease troubled minds subsequent to at least two other tragedies, the explosion of the Space Shuttle Columbia in 2003 and the massacre of dozens of students at Virginia Tech University in 2007. In a short national address following the Columbia explosion, Bush sounded many of the same notes that he had used after 9/11. Once more, Bush explained to America that, although we could not understand God’s purposes, we should be hopeful and comforted by the knowledge that he is with us. And, again, Bush drew upon his understanding of Isaiah.

The cause in which they died will continue. Mankind is led into the darkness beyond our world by the inspiration of discovery and the longing to understand. Our journey into space will go on.

In the skies today we saw destruction and tragedy. Yet farther than we can see, there is comfort and hope. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, “Lift your eyes and look to the heavens. Who created all these? He who brings
out the starry hosts one by one and calls them each by name. Because of His great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.”

The same Creator who names the stars also knows the names of the seven souls we mourn today. The crew of the shuttle Columbia did not return safely to Earth. Yet we can pray that all are safely home (Bush 2003b).

After the Virginia Tech massacre, Bush instead chose to cite Romans 12: 21 and to speak of the healing power of prayer. At a memorial on campus, Bush said, “Across the town of Blacksburg and in towns all across America, houses of worship from every faith have opened their doors and have lifted you up in prayer. People who have never met you are praying for you; they’re praying for your friends who have fallen and who are injured. There’s a power in these prayers, a real power. In times like this, we can find comfort in the grace and guidance of a loving God. As the Scriptures tells us, ‘Don’t be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.’” (Bush 2007b). Bush finished by praying that God’s love would touch all those who were suffering.

In truth, every president at some point or another will preach to a grieving nation. In fact, Barack Obama recently used comforting and calming religious rhetoric in his remarks at a memorial service for victims of tornadoes in Joplin, Missouri (Obama 2011a). Obama claimed that by coming together in the aftermath of the storm, the community “lived the words” of 2 Corinthians (4: 8-9) and had equally offered testament to the power of the Golden Rule.

A university turned itself into a makeshift hospital. Some of you used your pickup trucks as ambulances, carrying the injured on doors that served as stretchers. Your restaurants have rushed food to people in need. Businesses have filled trucks with donations. You’ve waited in line for hours to donate blood to people you know, but also to people you’ve never met. And in all this, you have lived the words of Scripture:
We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed;
we are perplexed, but not in despair;
Persecuted, but not forsaken;
cast down, but not destroyed;

As the Governor said, you have shown the world what it means to love thy neighbor. You’ve banded together. You’ve come to each other’s aid. You’ve demonstrated a simple truth: that amid heartbreak and tragedy, no one is a stranger. Everybody is a brother. Everybody is a sister. We can all love one another.

The President appropriately concluded his remarks by reciting a few bars of the spiritual “Amazing Grace.”

The reader should note that this second type of presidential religious rhetoric is not called comforting religious rhetoric but rather comforting and calming religious rhetoric. This is a conscious choice of nomenclature meant to signify that this style of religious rhetoric can serve multiple related purposes. Sometimes the president is not merely trying to comfort those who have lost. Sometimes, instead of turning to religion to combat sadness, the president turns to religion to dissipate anger. These situations, following riots or assassinations or the like, are thankfully rare. But they do happen and they can be marked by the appearance of presidential religious rhetoric.

Perhaps the best example of a presidential speech fitting this description would be Lyndon Johnson’s speech on the flurry of urban riots that rippled across the country in the spring of 1967, touching off violence and destruction in places like Newark and Detroit (Johnson 1967b). That summer Johnson addressed the nation on how America might understand and
respond to the tumult plaguing its cities. As part of his effort, Johnson announced the appointment of the Kerner Commission, an esteemed group of individuals that would be charged with understanding the origins of domestic unrest. In the future, the Commission would become a source of embarrassment for Johnson as its members faulted white racism as the primary cause of the rioting. Their report famously blared on its first page that America was “moving towards two societies- one white, one black- separate and unequal” and advocated dramatic policy changes to rectify the imbalances. Johnson was enraged by the Commission’s conclusions and he ignored its recommendations.

Yet, Johnson clearly shared some of the Commission’s concerns. In this speech, he tried to find a way to speak to a bitter, angry and divided country. Religious rhetoric was his chosen vehicle. In addition to making brief pleas for some of his policies, Model Cities and rat eradication funding (a “Civil Rats” bill, his critics jeered), Johnson announced that that he was calling for a day of prayer. “On this Sunday, July 30,” Johnson said, “I urge the citizens in every town, every city, and every home in this land to go into their churches- to pray for order and reconciliation among men. I appeal to every Governor, every mayor, every preacher, and every teacher, and parent to join and give leadership in this national observance.” Johnson pleaded with the country to help him close the wounds that were afflicting American society. He ended his speech with eloquent calls for prayer, for faith and with reference to Psalm 85:

So, my fellow citizens, let us go about our work. Let us clear the streets of rubble and quench the fires that hatred set. Let us feed and care for those who have suffered at the rioters’ hands- but let there be no bonus or reward or salutes for those who have inflicted that suffering.
Let us resolve that this violence is going to stop and there will be no bonus to flow from it. We can stop it. We must stop it. We will stop it.

And let us build something much more lasting: faith between man and man, faith between race and race. Faith in each other and faith in the promise of beautiful America.

Let us pray for the day when “mercy and truth are met together: righteousness and peace have kissed each other.” Let us pray- and let us work for better jobs and better housing and better education that so many millions of our own fellow Americans need so much tonight.

Let us then act in the Congress, in the city halls, and in every community, so that this great land of ours may truly be “one nation under God- with liberty and justice for all.” Good night and thank you.

Hence, Johnson’s solution to the riots in 1967 was not just the Kerner Commission and Model Cities, it was to use comforting and calming religious rhetoric to bring the people back together.

**Instrumental Religious Rhetoric**

The third type of presidential religious rhetoric has been termed instrumental religious rhetoric. Far more detail about what instrumental religious rhetoric is and how it can be evaluated is included in the following chapter. All but two of the post-war presidents have made use of this style of religious rhetoric. For now, it is worthwhile to devote some brief attention to those two men who did not.

One of the two postwar presidents who did not use instrumental religious rhetoric was Harry Truman. There seem to be two possible explanations for this finding. On the one hand, excessive displays of public religion may simply have made Truman feel uncomfortable. Scattered evidence suggests this may have been the case. In his 1949 State of the Union address,
the speech where Truman unveiled his “Fair Deal” policy program, Truman gave some serious thought to including, as Roosevelt used to call it, “the God stuff.” However, for whatever reason, Truman ultimately declined to provide any religious cover for his proposals (Ferrell 1994, 288). Perhaps this was because Truman had a visceral disgust for those who made a show of their faith. In the early stages of their courtship, Truman privately wrote his future wife Bess, “I am by religion like everything else. I think there is more in acting than in talking.” Truman’s admission hints at the idea that the President’s religious style was the same as his political style—plainspoken and understated. Indeed, Truman admitted to a confidant that he believed that “Religious stuffed shirts are just as bad or worse than political ones in my opinion.” Even beyond that, Truman thought that religious talk could prove counterproductive, as he had concluded a lot of the world’s problems stemmed from senseless fights over religious truth. He once wrote in his personal notes, “A lot of the world’s troubles have been caused by the interpretation of the Gospels and the controversies between sects and creeds. It is all so silly and comes of the prima donna complex again.” (Spalding 2009, 220-222).

A second potential explanation for Truman’s abstention from instrumental religious rhetoric revolves around his palpable lack of opportunities. When Truman served, television was just beginning to proliferate across the country. Travel remained frustratingly slow and time consuming. Anytime Truman wanted to fly outside of the capital, he had to do it by means of a propeller driven aircraft. It was not until the Kennedy Administration that a president would have a personal jet at his disposal (http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/air-force-one). Given these
constraints, Truman did not speak in public very often, certainly not by modern standards. He thus had a limited number of chances to make religious arguments for his political goals.

For example, Truman did make a religious plea for the Marshall Plan in a national radio address broadcast on St. Patrick’s Day 1948 (Truman 1948a). Truman had already addressed Congress that afternoon, calling for speedy action on the aid package in light of Soviet meddling in Czechoslovakia. In a hotel ballroom in New York, Truman tried to build on what he had said earlier. The President harshly criticized the Soviets, though not by name. “One nation has blocked action in the United Nations by using the veto time and time again,” Truman said. A number of peaceful, democratic countries “have been brought under the domination of one nation,” Truman added. Truman explained that there were concrete religious reasons that made it imperative to counter the growing influence of that one nation. The President observed, “Tyranny has, throughout history, assumed many disguises, and has relied on many false philosophies to justify its attack on human freedom. Communism masquerades as a doctrine of progress. It is nothing of the kind. It is, on the contrary, a movement of reaction. It denies that man is master of his fate, and consequently denies man’s right to govern himself. And even worse, communism denies the very existence of God. Religion is persecuted because it stands for freedom under God. This threat to our liberty and to our faith must be faced by each one of us.” In closing, Truman spoke of how the inherent goodness of the American cause, when combined with the country’s faith in God, meant that citizens should feel optimistic about the future: “We can have confidence in the righteousness of our course. The great ideals of liberty
and justice are powerful forces in the hearts of men in every country. The faith in God which sustains us, also sustains men in other lands.”

Hence, in this speech, Truman had begun make a religious case for the Marshall Plan. One of the main differences between the East and the West was said to be that one rejects God, while the other embraces him. The obvious supposition is that this is a reason that the Soviet Union must therefore be opposed. The purpose of the Marshall plan was said to be righteous. America’s faith in God, Truman promised, would sustain the country in the battles ahead.

The problem is that in the following weeks Truman did not make many other public appearances that would have allowed him to build upon these themes. A scan of Truman’s public papers shows that Truman would only make one other public appearance for the remainder of March, at a press conference on the 25th. He would only speak in public eight times throughout all of April. Instrumental religious rhetoric, as chapter three will clarify, is by definition a pattern of strategic discourse. For a president to be said to have used instrumental religious rhetoric, he must repeatedly make strong religious arguments on both major and minor occasions. It is very hard to see how Truman could have met this high standard when he so rarely spoke in public.

This is not to say that Truman shied away from religious language when he appeared in front of his fellow countrymen, however infrequently that may have been. Quite the contrary, Truman would from time to time openly express religious sentiments. But they would be haphazard, off-hand and not of the same spirit as instrumental religious rhetoric. One common hallmark of Truman’s rhetoric is that he would often draw that same religious contrast between
the U.S. and the Soviets, as he did again in a speech he gave two years later in Wyoming: “How do we meet this overriding problem- the most important one of our time? I will tell you two things we cannot do. First, we cannot compromise our own moral or ethical beliefs. We know, as our ancestors knew, that tyranny is evil. We know that this newest form of tyranny is a compound of evils. Communism denies all that we have come to know as democracy. It denies freedom and liberty and human dignity. It denies God. We cannot meet the challenge by any form of compromise with any such beliefs” (Truman 1950a). In quieter moments, Truman confessed that “Honest Communism, as set out in the Acts of the Apostles, would work. But Russian Godless Pervert Systems won’t work” (Hamby 1995, 314).

Along similar lines, Truman would say at other times that America’s very idea of freedom had a religious inspiration, a point he made explicitly as he commemorated a replica of the Liberty Bell that was being installed in his hometown: “Our concept of freedom has deep religious roots. We come under a divine command to be concerned about the welfare of our neighbors, and to help one another. For all men are the servants of God, and no one has the right to mistreat his fellow men” (Truman 1950b).

Truman additionally thought that America’s foreign policy should be focused on implementing God’s will here on Earth. He told a group of War II veterans that the country had a “need for divine guidance to direct our steps.” Truman went on, “When the peoples of the world shall accept the principle that it is the will of God that there be peace- there will be peace. And it is our obligation to be strong and to have faith in order that we may do our share toward carrying out the will of God. The inspiration which we receive from the heroic men whom we
honor here tonight will make more resolute our determination to put into practice the teachings of the great Disciple of Peace.” (Truman 1947).

This last quotation leads to an important observation. What Truman seemed to do the most, actually, was to contextualize his experiences in religious terms. He certainly would do this in private. Upon receiving a report detailing an atomic test explosion in 1945, Truman wrote in his diary that “It (the bomb) may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark.” Incidentally, Truman was not the only one whose nuclear fears found their expression in Biblical imagery. The lyrics of the 1945 country music hit “Atomic Power” were all fire and brimstone, too (Boyer 192-194).

But, unlike many, Truman’s Biblical interpretations were not confined to the bomb alone. Truman had the ability to translate something as straightforward as price controls into a religious allegory. Truman had a peculiar habit of writing letters that he had no intention of sending as a method of exercising his anger. In one such missive, he wrote that by opposing price controls “the people insist on following Mammon instead of Almighty God” (Hamby 1995, 383). Price controls were one of the things that sapped Truman’s popularity, but the President took heart from the fact that Christian leaders had never relied on public opinion to guide their actions. As Truman once asked a friend, “I wonder how far Moses would have gone if he had taken a poll in Egypt? What would Jesus Christ have preached if He had taken a poll in the land of Israel? Where would the Reformation have gone if Martin Luther had taken a poll?” (558).

The reference to Israel is well-timed because Truman viewed the question of whether or not to recognize the new Jewish state as a fundamentally religious question. Truman would tell
one journalist that one of the reasons he took such an intense interest in the Middle East was because of his reading of the Bible (Dallek 2008, 63). In confidence he was known to cite various verses that lent support to the Jewish claims, such as Deuteronomy 1: 8 and the Book of Isaiah, as having influenced his thinking on the issue (Spalding 2009, 229). Accordingly, he saw all of the participants in the struggle as playing predetermined roles. He told a friend, “I surely wish God Almighty would give the Children of Israel an Isaiah, the Christians a St. Paul and the Sons of Ishmael a peep at the Golden Rule” (Hamby 1995, 405).

It should not come as a surprise, then, that occasionally Truman’s penchant for understanding world developments in light of Biblical wisdom would reveal itself in his public comments. For example, in a ground breaking ceremony held at Wake Forest, Truman drew a parallel between U.S. foreign aid and the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10: 25-37): “For 6 long years now we have contended, with all the weapons of the mind and spirit, against the adherents of the false god of tyranny. When the nations of Europe, our neighbors, were left, like the man in the Scripture who fell among thieves, robbed and wounded and half dead, we have offered them our oil and our wine, without stint and without price” (Truman 1951). On another occasion, Truman acknowledged to an audience of medical professionals that he thought the country might be on the verge of fulfilling the millennial prophecies foretold at the end of the Bible:

And I have been told, and I am not telling you anything that is behind the scenes, that there are great discoveries just on the brink that will make the world a greater place in which to live. Let’s get ourselves ready to meet that situation. I think that is what the Almighty intended us to have. I think He set this great Nation of ours up as an example of what is foretold in the Testament of the millennium that is to come, and I think we can lead the
world in peace and in quiet, and to honor. That is exactly what I want to do. That is all I have worked for, for the last 3 years: to get a peace in the world that will work, and to let this atom discovery work for the welfare of mankind and not for its destruction…

We have met everything else in this mechanical age. Now let us see if we can’t make the greatest machine- the machine that God made- work as he intended it (Truman 1948b).

The point being is this: Truman did use religious rhetoric, but he did not use *instrumental* religious rhetoric. Mostly, what Truman did is to offer a religious interpretation of events. His religious themes were not consistent enough, not strategic enough, to qualify as instrumental, whether for reasons of personal taste or due to limits on his public visibility. Richard Nixon, on the other hand, is a different story altogether.

The Nixon White House was far from a God free zone. On the first Sunday after his inauguration Nixon began what would become the regular practice of hosting ecumenical worship services in the East Room of the White House. Celebrity preachers like Norman Vincent Peale, Rabbi Louis Finkelstein and Terence Cardinal Cooke ministered to Supreme Court justices, Cabinet officials, members of Congress and the White House staff. Nixon asked his chief of staff H.R. Haldeman to have the services broadcast on the radio and a collection of these sermons were even published in a book featuring a preface by the President himself (Ambrose 1989, 247, 476).

Beyond the White House services, Nixon had very visible relationships with a number of high profile religious leaders. Billy Graham was a frequent policy conduit and sounding board for the President. Nixon’s close ties with Graham provided him with the unique opportunity of being able to address one of the evangelist’s massive revival meetings at the University of
Tennessee in May of 1970. Nixon also worked closely with Rhode Island rabbi Baruch Korff. Korff, a strong proponent of Nixon’s foreign policy, set up the National Citizens Committee for Fairness to the Presidency, a vocal defender of the President as his personal scandals piled up (Parmet 1990, 633). Last, Nixon hired a recognized and controversial Jesuit priest, Father John McLaughlin, as an aide and speechwriter (636).

Still, Nixon was not comfortable talking about public policy in religious terms. Even when religious rhetoric seemed a natural fit, Nixon demurred. One of Nixon’s major domestic policy campaigns was his Family Assistance Plan, a proposal to replace AFDC with a new welfare program combining a guaranteed national income with various work and job training requirements. Welfare reform could have easily been described in religious terms given the Bible’s calls for compassion towards the poor. However, the most Nixon was willing to do was to respond to religiously motivated criticism of his policy. He did not try to turn that religious criticism to his advantage.¹ Before the Republican Governor’s Conference in Williamsburg, VA in April of 1971, Nixon attempted to defend himself:

Another great strength of America is that we believe in a helping hand for those of genuine need. The Bible tells us that charity is the greatest virtue and, as all of you know, that word “charity” in the Bible, in some versions, is interpreted as love. It blesses both the giver and the receiver.

But I submit to you, gentleman, that it is not charity to maintain a system which permits or encourages human beings to let die within themselves the

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¹Ironically, Bill Clinton later made welfare reform a centerpiece of his first term in office as well. Despite being far more comfortable using religious language than Nixon, he, too, rejected possible spiritual arguments that he could have made in favor of his policy. Instead, Clinton consistently stressed the theme that any program should be “tough” on work and responsibility while not being tough on children. Welfare had to be a “second chance, not a way of life.”
energies, the dignity, the drive that gives meaning and satisfaction to life itself.

It is not charity to bind human beings into a cycle of despair and dependence when, with a little courage and a little imagination and a little common sense, we can end this cycle (Nixon 1971a).

Nixon was far more likely to discuss the fortunes of the local college football team, something he did with a frequency that almost boggles the mind, than he was to mention God, Christ, the Bible or anything similar.

Nixon did, however, view himself as a spiritual leader of sorts. But it was a vaguely defined spirit, at best, that Nixon attempted to cultivate. Nixon did not use religion to pursue a specific goal; rather, religion itself was the goal. At every opportunity, Nixon tried to convince his audience of the importance of America’s spiritual strength, of the importance of its morals and its values. He exhorted his audiences to protect these things at all costs. Likely the most high profile occasion on which Nixon discussed these relationships was his 1970 State of the Union address. At the end of the speech, Nixon talked about the importance of Congress providing spiritual leadership for the country.

But let us, above all, recognize a fundamental truth. We can be the best clothed, best fed, best housed people in the world, enjoying clean air, clean water, beautiful parks, but we could still be the unhappiest people in the world without an indefinable spirit- the lift of a driving dream which has made America, from its beginning, the hope of the world.

Two hundred years ago this was a new nation of 3 million people, weak militarily, poor economically. But America meant something to the world then which could not be measured in dollars, something far more important than military might.

Listen to Thomas Jefferson in 1802: We act not ‘for ourselves alone, but for the whole human race.’”
We had a spiritual quality then which caught the imagination of millions of people in the world.

Today, when we are the richest and strongest nation in the world, let it not be recorded that we lack the moral and spiritual idealism which made us the hope of the world at the time of our birth…

Even more than the programs I have described today, what this nation needs is an example from its elected leaders in providing the spiritual and moral leadership which no programs for material progress can satisfy (Nixon 1970a).

It may seem somewhat surprising to encounter a president lecturing other elected officials in this type of manner but it was nothing unusual for Nixon. He talked to everybody like this. He reminded a gathering of Midwestern news media executives that the U.S. could not play its special role “unless this is a healthy land, with a healthy government, a healthy citizenry, a healthy economy, and above all, the moral and spiritual health that can only come from the hearts of people and their minds, and that will only come as people are reassured from time to time…” He asked the opinion leaders to “keep them (the people) in balance” (Nixon 1971b).

When speaking to the annual convention of the National Catholic Education Association, Nixon ruminated on the failed civilizations of the past, remarking that their history teaches us that “a nation can be rich, a nation can be powerful, a nation can be well educated, but if its people lack character it will not stand.” So it was important, Nixon concluded, that these teachers also instruct their pupils in “the old values of honor, of morality, of love of country, and remind them also that America’s religious faith has always kept us strong in times of testing” (Nixon 1972a).

Indeed, for Nixon, at the bottom of many problems was simply a spiritual deficiency. He explicitly made this case in the context of urban affairs issues. Nixon told a radio audience that
the troubles in urban areas were a product of “a crisis of morale” and that consequently his Administration had “increased the sense of freedom and control in our communities to meet the crisis of the spirit.” As a result, Nixon said, “the renewal of the spirit in the cities of our Nations means that they have a chance again to become in reality what they have always been in our dreams” (Nixon 1972b). Even at the aforementioned Billy Graham revival, when religious commentary would have been entirely appropriate, Nixon stuck to the same old script: “Some will not share his religious convictions, but all with me will share respect for the message that he brings because what he will say to you is what America and the world needs to hear, and that is that man does not live by bread alone, that the material things are not enough, that if we are going to bring people together as we must bring them together, if we are going to have peace in the world, if our young people are going to have a fulfillment beyond simply those material things, they must turn to those great spiritual sources that have made America the great country that it is” (Nixon 1970b).

As it is, this rather surprising finding is echoed in a relatively recent paper by Lawrence Jacobs and others (2003). These scholars undertook the herculean task of coding the content of a sample of over 179,257 lines of text from Nixon’s presidential statements over the duration of his administration. Their analysis shows that overwhelmingly these statements centered on substantive policy issues as opposed to what they term “symbolic statements about morality or faith” (757). According to their results, less than one-hundredth of the total volume (0.6%) of all of Nixon’s statements would be considered symbolic. And this marginal total includes even off-hand, casual references such as the President saying “God bless” to his assembled
audience. So, it seems safe to conclude that religion was one “trick” that Tricky Dick never learned.

It is possible to speculate as to an explanation for Nixon’s surprising reluctance to cloak his policies in religious language. The answer may rest in Nixon’s complex personal relationship with God. Nixon’s father, Frank, had converted from Methodism to Quakerism under the guidance of his deeply religious mother, Hannah. Frank embraced his new faith wholeheartedly. He taught Sunday school in Yorba Linda, CA and Nixon attended his lessons regularly once he turned five. Frank’s lectures often touched on current issues and he implored his students to make Christianity an important part of their civic lives (Ambrose 1987, 28). In addition, Yorba Linda was marked by the unmistakable presence of Quaker culture. A spartan town populated mainly by young couples, nearly all of whom were Quakers, Yorba Linda had no liquor stores, no bars, no theatres, no social life of any kind beyond those activities directly connected with the church (19). Young Richard would go to church services as many as four times on Sundays, often speaking about his beliefs before the entire congregation.

After the family moved to Whittier, CA to open a general store, even though their social options had increased, religion remained a central part of their lives. For Frank, religion became even more important to him after the sudden death of their son, Arthur, from an undiagnosed illness. Frank took the tragedy as a warning from God, thereafter refusing to open his store on Sundays. He also began frequently driving his family to Los Angeles in order to participate in revival meetings organized by preachers like Paul Rader and Aimee Semple McPherson (41).
Unable to afford possible opportunities to attend Harvard or Yale, Nixon attended local Whittier College. A small liberal arts school of only about four hundred students, Whittier retained its heritage as a past Quaker institution. Although by the time Nixon matriculated it was formally nonsectarian, Whittier continued to instruct students in Quaker ethics. Indeed, most of the faculty were, themselves, Quakers. Therefore it is somewhat surprising that it was also at Whittier where Nixon first began to question his own faith. In a senior year essay, Nixon admitted that he could no longer accept a literal interpretation of the Bible. He also rejected Jesus as the Son of God and dismissed the resurrection. Nixon was in the process of developing a symbolic, almost deistic, view of Christianity. And as his astute biographer Stephen Ambrose (1987, 58) writes, “From that point on, religion was no longer important to him.” In some sense, Nixon made his final break with Quakerism when he set aside its pacifist ideals and voluntarily enlisted in the Navy during World War II (Greene 1992, 6).

It is hard to know what, exactly, brought about Nixon’s crisis of faith. Perhaps it was being exposed to new ways of thinking at Whittier. Perhaps it was the grief over losing another brother, Harold, to tuberculosis while in college in March of 1933. Admittedly, Nixon did retain some important vestiges of his early religiosity. Watergate appears to have brought out these latent feelings. In an infamous incident, at 9 PM on the night prior to his resignation Nixon summoned Henry Kissinger to the White House. For about an hour and a half, Nixon and Kissinger proceeded to review their time in office. When Kissinger finally attempted to extricate himself from an overly emotional President, Nixon asked him to kneel together in prayer. So, the two prayed while Nixon uncontrollably cried (Dallek 2007, 609). It would thus be incorrect
to call Nixon irreligious or even agnostic. But, at the same time, one can perhaps understand why someone like Nixon might have refrained from using religious rhetoric in public when he might not have been entirely convinced by such words himself.

The following chapter will seek to explain how instrumental religious rhetoric might help a president, how we might be able to identify when this type of language is part of a president’s rhetorical strategy and how we might be able to determine the effectiveness of such themes— or, as we will see, the lack thereof.
Chapter 3

Theory and Methods

The following chapter has two basic parts to it. First, I briefly sketch a theory that explains why it is reasonable to assume that instrumental religious rhetoric could be of use to a goal oriented president. And, second, I explain the process by which cases were identified and evaluated.

The definition that I adopt of a successful religious rhetorical strategy is as follows:

*A successful use of instrumental religious rhetoric will improve the public’s opinion of both the president and his objective, improve the president’s media coverage and result in Congress supporting his goals.*

A president has three important relationships that he must constantly work to maintain—his relationship with his constituents, his relationship with the press and his relationship with the membership of Congress. If instrumental religious rhetoric “works,” it is reasonable to argue that it should strengthen the president’s ties to each of these three separate, but interconnected, actors. Based on existing research there is solid enough evidence to believe that this may, in fact, be a possibility.

Chart 3.1 provides a visual illustration of the causal pathways by which religious rhetoric might benefit a goal-oriented president. To begin, effective religious rhetoric should impact public opinion, both by boosting a president’s approval ratings as well as by moving opinion on the specific issue in the president’s preferred direction. In fact, these two effects are likely related; when a president is more popular, there is reason to think that his activities will have
Chart 3.1: Why Instrumental Religious Rhetoric *Might* Influence Political Outcomes

- Presidential Religious Rhetoric
  - A: Opinion (Approval and Issue Specific)
  - C: Media Coverage
  - B: Congressional Action
  - D: Connection between Opinion and Media Coverage
more of an impact on the public’s opinion on the issues.

In terms of the effect of rhetoric on presidential approval, a number of scholars have documented that major speeches can improve a president’s standing. Brace and Hinckley (1993) have shown that a major speech occurring in a president’s first term will lead, on average, to a six point bounce in the polls. However, an address falling in a president’s second term will not produce a significant change in approval. A well-known study by Ragsdale (1984) finds a slightly smaller effect. Her analysis of presidential speechmaking from Truman to Carter finds that, controlling for other significant predictors, a major speech will cause a three point increase in a president’s popularity. Exactly how a speech might change a president’s approval is unclear, but Druckman and Holmes (2004) suggest that the mechanism at work might very well be priming. Their research finds that presidential rhetoric is capable of changing the criteria on which the head of state is evaluated, thereby potentially boosting his standing with the public.

In terms of the effect of rhetoric on issue opinion, a scattering of studies argue that a president can through his words persuade the public to support his agenda. For instance, in an early paper Conover and Sigelman (1982) used data collected from an original poll to test the impact President Carter had on opinions on the Iranian hostage crisis. Their analysis confirms that presidents can have great success when it comes to changing minds. At least 40% and as many as 63% of respondents who initially did not approve of a policy changed their minds once President Carter’s endorsement was made clear. Similarly, Meernik and Ault’s (2001) model finds that a major presidential address can boost support for a president’s foreign policies by about six points. In terms of domestic issues, Zaller (1992, 97) comments on data that showed a
dramatic effect for Richard Nixon’s national address on wage and price controls in 1971. Almost overnight support for controls among Republican activists rose 45%, while Democrats remained unaffected. The public as whole grew about 10 points more favorable towards controls in the weeks ahead.

As it is, the effect that a president’s rhetoric can have on issue opinion may very well be circumscribed by their own popularity at the time. Mondak (1993) finds that a well-liked president can transform his popularity into support for his agenda by promoting those ideas at a time when he is riding high in the polls. Specifically, Mondak shows that a presidential source cue produces a positive effect once a president’s approval exceeds 57%. Page, Shapiro and Dempsey (1987) also point to the importance of presidential approval in moderating the effect that presidential speeches might have on public opinion. Their models suggest that popular presidents tend to have a small positive effect on opinion. A popular president could “hammer away” at an issue by means of repeated speeches and statements and in return he can reasonably expect to see a 5 or 10 percentage point change in public opinion over the course of several months. Unpopular presidents, however, are totally out of luck; they can trigger no positive change in opinion at all. In another study, Page and Shapiro (1984) discovered that the effect of a presidential speech increases in tandem with their popularity. More popular presidents can even more effectively lead public opinion. For instance, Franklin Roosevelt received the support of 71% of Americans at the start of 1941. Over the course of two months, FDR made a number of speeches advocating aid to Britain, including a major address on Lend-Lease that he delivered at the Academy Awards. When Gallup surveyed Americans in March, the results showed that
the percentage of Americans willing to help Britain even at the risk of war had risen 7 points, an unusually large effect that the authors attribute to Roosevelt’s efforts.

Hence, if instrumental religious rhetoric is important, it should improve the public’s evaluation of the president, and then either directly or indirectly (through that higher approval) move issue opinion towards the president’s position. Bear in mind that this is both a limited and selective review of the literature. Much research exists that should instead make us question the possible impact of presidential rhetoric. Indeed, that research will be discussed extensively in the conclusion and, ultimately, this study will agree with the pessimists on the other side. But, for now, remember that all I am trying to accomplish is to outline how religious rhetoric might function in theory. And there is ample enough support behind pathway A.

If religious rhetoric is ultimately found to improve the opinion the public holds of a president, then it is logical to expect that Congress will be more favorably disposed to act upon his agenda (B). Admittedly, the literature is a bit mixed in this area as well. Rivers and Rose (1985), for instance, discover that, holding the size of a president’s program constant, a 1% increase in a president’s support in the Gallup poll translates into a 1% increase in the president’s legislative approval rate. Brace and Hinckley (1992, 81) reach almost the same conclusion. They report that presidents will experience 7.5% more Congressional victories for every 10% they rise in the polls. On the other side, however, Collier and Sullivan (1995) fail to document any positive approval effect.

Most likely, the relationship between presidential popularity and legislative support is a contingent one. Canes-Wrone and de Marchi (2002), for example, argue that high approval
ratings can lead to policy influence but only on issues that are both salient and complex. Bond, Fleisher and Wood (2003) posit partisanship, rather than saliency and complexity, as their condition. As partisanship worsens, presidents are less able to capitalize on their high popularity in Congress. Thus presidents from Reagan on have struggled to use their high ratings, when they had them, to their advantage.

It appears somewhat safe to conclude that, at least in certain circumstances, presidential approval and Congressional action are indeed linked. But we also need to avoid getting tangled up in these vagaries of the literature. Neustadt (1960, 86-107) lucidly writes about the importance of “prestige” to a president. People in and about the Capitol try to gauge how a president is being received and alter their behavior accordingly. Hence, in many cases Neustadt explains how Truman’s low ratings were a hindrance, while Eisenhower’s high ratings a boon. Although his book is not particularly comprehensive, Neustadt’s assumption that a president with high approval ratings will be more successful agrees with what we see when we watch politics taking place in the real world. Members of the government certainly do seem to act more deferentially to a well-liked President, the Democratic reluctance to challenge “Teflon” Ronald Reagan perhaps being an example.

Path B on the diagram, it must be emphasized, also represents issue specific opinion. If instrumental religious rhetoric leads to more public backing for a policy, then we would also expect this to impact Congressional behavior. As it turns out, the U.S. governmental system actually is fairly responsive, all things considered. Early work by Miller and Stokes (1963) made scholars a bit skeptical of the correspondence between opinion and policy. They examined the
correlations between constituency opinion and roll call behavior in the House on social welfare, civil rights and foreign policy issues. Their path analysis, however, showed a very low level of responsiveness. It was up to Erikson (1978) to point out the flaw in their methodology. Miller and Stokes used just one national survey, with only 13 respondents per district, on average. This was hardly large enough to generate reliable estimates of district opinion. Erikson corrected for this flaw by simulating district opinion based on other measurements. His correlations were much more substantial. Since that time, far more scholars have agreed with Erikson than with Miller and Stokes.

To cite a few examples, Bartels (1991) finds that the estimated preferences of individual members for defense spending were strongly related to their constituency’s opinion on a build-up. In fact, this result held for safe seat members as well. On controversial Cold War trade and aid programs, Bailey (2003) shows that opinion also rules. Senators hailing from regions where people were more supportive of aid and military action were shown to be more supportive of foreign assistance. In a wider sense, House members’ roll-call ideology regularly matches the ideological leanings of their district (Erikson and Wright 2000). Moreover, a relationship between issue opinion and policy definitely is visible in the aggregate. Broad measures of policy activity and public mood frequently move in tandem (Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002). When the public is more conservative, it gets more conservative policy. When the public is more liberal, it gets more liberal policy.

The fact that members of Congress appear to pay close attention to what their constituents want makes intuitive sense, given their preponderant focus on getting re-elected
(Mayhew 1974). There are exceptions, for sure (see Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). Other pulls, such as interest groups (Hall and Wayman 1990) and party goals (Cox and McCubbins 1993) do exist. And certain opinions, such as those of voters (Griffin and Newman 2005) or the wealthy (Gilens 2005) might count more than others. But as Burstein (2003, 29) wisely wrote in a review of the opinion-policy literature, “No one believes that public opinion always determines public policy; few believe it never does… What distinguishes those who believe democracy gives citizens genuine control over their government from those who believe it does not, is thus disagreement over matters of degree.”

The next pathway on Chart 3.1 connects instrumental religious rhetoric to the reporting of the press (C). This is defensible, as well, for in multiple settings it has been proved that rhetoric has the power to structure media coverage of the president’s agenda. In an interesting paper, Gershkoff and Kushner (2005) attempt to analyze the consequences of President Bush’s strategy of implicitly linking the Iraq War with the 9/11 attacks. As part of their article, they perform a content analysis of the New York Times coverage of Bush’s major speeches between September 11, 2002 and May 1, 2003, coding articles printed in the two days following each speech. Their sample size is small- just 35 stories- but the results are still telling. In only 12 stories were Democrats quoted and just 9 stories included criticisms casting doubt on Bush’s case. These findings lead the authors to conclude that the press by and large accepted Bush’s arguments.

In another study on the Bush presidency, Coe et al. (2004) focus on the President’s use of binary discourse, themes of good versus evil and security versus peril. Binary themes, the authors claim, are particularly well-suited for the U.S. culture where the media preferences
conflict driven stories and catchy sound-bites. By coding the content of major Bush addresses prior to the Iraq War in addition to editorials from 20 newspapers, the authors are able to show that the editorials frequently echoed the president’s own rhetorical structure.

As usual, there do seem to be limits to the president’s ability to dictate the terms by which the media covers an issue or event. Perhaps, according to Entman (2004), these limits have even increased following the end of the Cold War. News is now, as he calls it, “messier.” Entman proposes a “cascade model” of news coverage of foreign affairs where the Administration competes with other elites and the media themselves in a contest to define problems and solutions. In certain scenarios, the President will struggle to prevail. If an issue or event is ambiguous, journalists will have professional motivations that will lead them to want to include the views of the opposition. Or if public opinion is split, other elites will be more likely to challenge the president’s thinking. But even in this competitive model, Entman positions the president as the first and most important actor; power flows both ways, but most frames flow from the White House to elites then to the media and so forth.

Lastly, there seems to be little question about the impact of the media on opinion (D), at least not anymore. In the early days of social science, academics agreed on a so-called “minimal effects” model of media influence. The primitive voting studies of Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944) convinced many people to dismiss the media’s role in political behavior. This perspective has gradually evolved, however, to allow a more nuanced role for the media, a key transition point being the groundbreaking work of Iyengar and Kinder (1987). The experiments
conducted by these two researchers provide strong evidence of the existence of both agenda-setting and priming effects.

Agenda-setting occurs when the problems receiving the most prominent coverage on the news become the problems the viewers consider to be the nation’s most important. In one Iyengar and Kinder experiment, participants initially ranked national defense as the nation’s sixth most important problem. Following exposure to a series of newscasts highlighting inadequacies in the U.S. military, however, those same participants now ranked defense as the country’s second most important problem. The ranking of defense in the control group, which did not see any defense stories, did not change (17-18).

Priming occurs when the media emphasizes the importance of certain matters relative to others, thereby causing viewers to judge political objects on those grounds. In one priming experiment, Iyengar and Kinder randomly assigned their participants to one of three treatments. One group saw stories on unemployment, another on arms control and a third on civil rights. In a post-experiment questionnaire, the participants evaluated Ronald Reagan’s performance on each issue as well as his overall performance as president. The results offered solid proof that priming had occurred. In each of the cases the impact of the issue rating on Reagan’s overall mark more than doubled (67-68).

A third effect the media is believed to have on public opinion is framing. This is the most intrusive of the three. A framing effect occurs when a change in how an issue or event is presented leads to a change in the public’s opinion of it. This happens because many questions can be viewed from different perspectives and which perspective a person adopts will lead them
to weigh certain considerations more heavily than others as they make up their minds (Chong
and Druckman 2007, 104-106). If the question of whether gay and lesbian partnerships should
be legally recognized is framed as a matter of special rights or as one of equal rights, for
example, will influence how an individual responds (Price, Nir and Cappella 2005). Likewise, if
a racist rally is framed as a matter of free speech instead of as a disruption of public order,
respondents will express more toleration for it (Nelson, Clawson and Oxley 1997) and so on.

Note that the diagram does not show pathways directly connecting rhetoric to Congress
or the media to Congress. It may be questionable to presume such linkages exist. The truth is
that Congress is increasingly independent these days. Edwards (1989) offers a good deal of
evidence to support the point that presidential influence over Congress is quite bounded. Mainly,
Edwards works with a dataset of CQ support indices as he assesses the importance of the various
different resources presidents have to work with, things like approval, party ties and leadership
skills. If a president has a good amount of one of these resources, does he draw more
Congressional support? The chapter on skills is illuminating. Here, Edwards shows that a
president reputed to be a wizard of Congressional leadership, “master of the Senate” Lyndon
Johnson, was surprisingly outperformed by the disinterested Kennedy. Overall, Edwards argues
that the president can only lead Congress “at the margins.”

In their own significant study of presidential-Congressional relations, Bond and Fleisher
(1990) agree. Taking roll-call votes as the unit of analysis, the two men show that presidency-
centered explanations of presidential success (approval and skill) explain much less than
Congressional-centered explanations (party and ideology). From their view, presidential success is a function of variables outside of the president’s control.

There are many reasons that can account for the insulation of Congress from media and presidential pressure. For one, the incumbency advantage has grown steadily over time (e.g. Cox and Katz 1996; Erikson 1971; Levitt and Wolfram 1997; Mayhew 1974). In between 1946 and 2006, 92.4% of House incumbents won re-election. In the Senate, that number is 79.0%. In some years, almost no sitting members go down to defeat; in both the 1998 and 2000 House races, 99% of representatives were re-elected (Jacobson 2009, 28-30). Plus, in a related development, partisan gerrymandering has reduced the number of potentially competitive seats to begin with. Many Representatives and Senators need not fear a serious challenge absent a scandal. Furthermore, the explosive growth of PACs and other sources of contributions have made it more feasible for candidates to raise their own funding without reliance on party leaders (Sabato 1984). This reality undercuts the willingness of any member to kowtow to the president. What does he have to threaten them with? As such, it might be a bit naïve to believe that an inspiring presidential speech would directly result in Congressional action.

Still, as discussed above, Congress does, at least some of the time, react and respond to public opinion. That is something they do have to worry about. Consequently, members spend a lot of their days and nights back home in their districts sounding out their constituents and developing persuasive ways of explaining their actions to them (Fenno 1978). Opinion, therefore, is the crucial part of this overall conceptualization. Rhetoric might be able to influence Congress through opinion. And, rhetoric might be able to first improve the tone of the
press coverage, which then will have beneficial effects on the polls, which then will force Congress’ hand.

In sum, Chart 3.1 represents precisely why we might expect instrumental religious rhetoric to help a president supplement his weak constitutional authority. What this section is trying to accomplish is to convince the reader that we have grounds to believe that religious rhetoric could aid a president in his quest to achieve his policy objectives. It is no more than a hypothesis to be tested. The majority of this dissertation is dedicated to assessing the applicability of- and ultimately rejecting- this model.

**How Cases Were Identified**

The first step towards evaluating this theory involved determining what each president was trying to accomplish. What were their goals? To take an extreme example, Lyndon Johnson proposed an eye-popping 1,902 bills during his five plus years in office (Bernstein 1996, 529). Obviously not all of these initiatives were equally important. Nor would it be worthwhile (or even feasible) to study the arguments Johnson made in favor of each of these policies. What was first needed, then, was a way to narrow the universe of objectives down to the most important ones. These would be the goals a president was most invested in and they would likely be the ones the president faced the most opposition on. If religious rhetoric is helpful on these hotly contested issues, we can safely assume it would be persuasive on those issues people feel less strongly about, too.

Unfortunately, using an existing list of accomplishments, such as Mayhew’s (1991) well known dataset of significant laws, was not an option since I am as much interested in cases
where a religious rhetorical strategy failed as those where it succeeded. Plus, the impetus for each policy must derive from the president, and not Congress. The fundamental task of this part of the study is to examine the development of a president’s rhetorical arguments from when he first introduced a political goal to when it was ultimately abandoned or adopted and then assess what impact those arguments (if they included religion) might have had on this final outcome. The key unit of analysis is not always a law, then, but rather, for lack of a better term, a campaign for a political objective.

I therefore developed a set of five coding rules that must be met for a goal to be considered a major presidential objective:

1) *Does the campaign have a precise starting point (i.e. a major public speech announcing the initiative)?*

2) *Does the Administration attempt to follow through?*

3) *Can evidence be found (i.e. comments by presidential advisors) indicating that this objective was a priority for the president?*

4) *Is the objective identified as important by the majority of secondary source historical accounts of the Administration?*

5) *Does the president require the cooperation of other actors (i.e. Congress) in order to achieve his objective?*

Coding rule one is included because, again, the unit of analysis is a campaign for a political objective. By definition, it should roughly have a start and an end.

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2 Indeed, the emphasis on passed laws is a major criticism of Mayhew made by a group of scholars who refute his findings by instead examining legislation that failed (Edwards III, Barrett and Peake 1997).
Coding rules two and three are included in order to help us distinguish between the legitimate goals of an Administration and others that stood more as public relations maneuvers. Take, for example, the Americans with Disabilities Act. It was a tremendous social advance, a bill of great historical import, and something that George H.W. Bush spoke of often. However, historians agree that Bush did not expend much effort for the bill (see, i.e. Mervin 1996, 98-101). It originated outside of the Administration, it was a personal cause for many Senators and it was broadly popular on its own merits. Bush’s rhetoric on the ADA thus seems more like an attempt to position himself to be able to claim credit and arguably should be treated differently than other policies he was more invested in.

Coding rule four is included because it ensures that an expert consensus has formed behind each objective’s importance. Although some initiatives that have been excluded from my list may be debatable, all those that have been included should be less so on account of this rule.

Finally, coding rule five is meant to eliminate what William Howell (2003) has called “power without persuasion,” those things a president can accomplish unilaterally, whether by executive order, a national directive, or by other executive authority. All presidents have access to these powers regardless of skill, Howell points out, and it is the institutional factors (i.e. the ideological make-up of Congress) that determine the ability of any given president to exercise them. This rule will eliminate many of the most important moments of the last half century from consideration: Truman’s order to desegregate the military, Eisenhower’s nationalization of the Guard in Little Rock, Carter’s failed hostage rescue attempt, etc. Certainly presidents speak publicly about these kinds of decisions. But these speeches, I argue, must be treated as
qualitatively different. In these cases of ‘power without persuasion,’” the president has already acted. His remarks work more to provide justification for what he has done, as opposed to convincing people to support what he plans to do in the future.

Table 3.1 is the list of presidential objectives that were identified for all post-war presidents based upon these rules. There are 144 in total, making for an average of 13.09 objectives per president. The early activist Democrats predictably have the highest numbers. Truman, Kennedy and Johnson each had 18 major goals a piece. Ford, president for just two years, had the fewest, with 8.

A shrewd observer of Table 3.1 would immediately object to one inclusion based on my final rule, Ford’s pardon of Richard Nixon. True, Ford did act unilaterally. He had the constitutional authority to grant a pardon and he decided to do so with little to no outside consultation. However, I would make the case that the pardon was not the end, but rather the means. In fact, Ford was conflicted about pardoning Nixon. His first press conference on August 28, 1974 went a long way towards changing his mind. The press conference was dominated by questions about Nixon, many of which left Ford angry or confused. As he explains in his memoirs,

All this forced me to address the issue squarely for the first time. I had to get the monkey off my back. I was already struggling with the question of who had jurisdiction over the papers and tapes, and that was cutting into my work schedule more and more every day. It intruded into time that I urgently needed to deal with a faltering economy and mounting foreign policy problems all over the world. With these critical issues pressing upon me- and the nation- I simply couldn’t listen to lawyers’ endless arguments about Nixon’s tapes and documents or answer constant questions about his legal status (Ford 1979, 159).
Table 3.1: Major Presidential Objectives

**President Harry Truman**

- Increase in the minimum wage
- Full employment legislation
- Universal military training
- Public housing program
- Reorganization of the nation’s defense system
- Civil rights program (anti-lynching law, abolition of poll taxes, FEPC, etc.)
- Aid to Greece and Turkey (Truman Doctrine)
- Marshall Plan
- National health insurance
- Repeal of Taft-Hartley
- Federal aid to education
- Brannan Plan (income support for small farmers)
- Ratification of NATO treaty/ funding for NATO
- Point IV program (technical assistance to Latin America)
- Korean War
- Expansion of Social Security
- Funding for public works
- Establishment of an atomic energy commission

**President Dwight Eisenhower**

- Defeat the Bricker amendment (limited executive authority in foreign affairs)
- Cut defense expenditures/ disarmament
- Expand Social Security eligibility
- Immigration reform
- Atoms for Peace
- Health reinsurance (subsidies to purchase private plans)
- Statehood for Hawaii
• St. Lawrence Seaway construction
• Public housing (140,000 new homes)
• Reducing government involvement in agricultural markets (flexible price supports, Soil Bank, etc.)
• SEATO
• Formosa resolution
• Interstate highway system
• School construction funds
• Open Skies
• Mutual Security program of foreign aid
• Eisenhower Doctrine
• Balanced budget for fiscal 1958 (“Battle of the Budget”)
• Civil rights legislation
• Nuclear test ban
• Labor reform

**President John Kennedy**

• Peace Corps
• Alliance for Progress
• Creation of a cabinet level Department of Urban Affairs
• Address chronic unemployment in WV and other hard hit states
• Education bills- federal aid to elementary and secondary schools and college scholarships
• Medicare
• Worker re-training
• Civil defense program
• NASA lunar landing
• Precautionary measures in response to Berlin crisis of 1961 (additional military appropriations, increase in draft quotas, etc.)
• Redress balance of payments
• Force a roll-back in steel industry prices
• Tax cut
• Civil rights bill
• Test ban treaty
• Housing legislation
• Minimum wage increase
• Funding for mental retardation programs

President Lyndon Johnson
• Tax cut
• End to discrimination in public accommodations
• War on poverty
• Medicare
• Federal aid to education
• Financial support for college students (scholarships, loans, work study)
• Voting rights legislation
• Elimination of country based immigration quotas
• Protection of water sources
• Clean air laws
• Beautification (highway landscaping, restrictions on billboards, etc.)
• Gulf of Tonkin resolution
• Tax increase (1967-1968)
• Fair housing
• Foundations for the arts and humanities
• Model cities
• Anti-crime legislation
• Creation of a Department of Transportation and passage of auto safety laws

President Richard Nixon
• Safeguard ABM system
• Anti-crime legislation (particularly the DC “no knock” crime control bill)
• Family Assistance Plan
• Revenue sharing
• Vietnamization
• Haynesworth and Carswell Supreme Court nominations
• Busing moratorium and its companion inner city educational aid
• SALT I
• Avoiding impeachment due to Watergate related offenses
• National health insurance program (employer mandate, HMO support)
• Executive branch reorganization (creation of OMB and Domestic Council, reduction in cabinet departments)

President Gerald Ford
• Moving past Watergate (pardon of Richard Nixon)
• Anti-inflation package, in particular a one year 5% surcharge tax increase
• Whip Inflation Now (WIN) volunteer initiative
• Temporary $16 billion stimulus tax cut to combat late 1974 recession
• Aid to South Vietnam in response to Northern Vietnam offensive (2 requests)
• Second tax cut package matching a $28 billion permanent reduction with $28 billion in spending cuts
• Obtaining concessions from New York City in return for federal bailout legislation
• Energy program of oil decontrol plus taxes and fee increases

President Jimmy Carter
• Economic stimulus package featuring a $50 tax rebate
• Cut funding from unnecessary water projects
• First energy plan (tax on domestic oil, gas guzzlers, etc.)
• Panama Canal transfer treaties
• Welfare reform (limited new spending, combination of work and income support)
• Tax reform (end to tax shelters and various loopholes)
• Put an end to “Lance Affair” investigation of OMB director and friend Bert Lance
• Second energy plan (decontrol, windfall profits, synfuels, EMB, etc.)
• SALT II treaty
• Hospital cost containment legislation
• Deregulation of airline and trucking industries
- Civil service reform
- Creation of a Department of Education
- Balanced budget in 1980

**President Ronald Reagan**
- Cut income taxes
- Cut domestic spending
- Boost defense spending
- 1982 deficit reduction package
- SDI missile defense (Star Wars)
- Tax reform (eliminating loopholes, reducing number of brackets, cutting individual rates)
- Bork Supreme Court nomination
- INF treaty
- Aid for Nicaraguan Contras and El Salvadorian government
- Surviving Iran-Contra Scandal

**President George H.W. Bush**
- S&L bailout and restructuring
- Capital gains tax cut
- Deficit reduction package
- Expelling Iraq from Kuwait (Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm)
- Amendments to the Clean Air Act
- Nomination of John Tower as Secretary of Defense
- Education programs (school and teacher awards, voluntary testing and model schools)
- Anti-drug legislation
- Thomas Supreme Court nomination

**President Bill Clinton**
- Deficit reduction package
- NAFTA
- Healthcare reform
- Balanced budget in 1995
- Welfare reform
- Avoiding impeachment due to fallout from affair with Monica Lewinsky
- Stimulus package
- Balanced budget in 1997
- Crime bill (assault weapon ban, addition of 100,000 officers, expansion of death penalty and three strikes law)

*President George W. Bush*

- 2001 surplus tax cut
- 2003 stimulus tax cut
- No Child Left Behind educational reform
- Funding for combating AIDS in Africa
- Medicare prescription drug benefit
- Social Security privatization
- Immigration reform (temporary worker program with increased border controls)
- War on Terror (Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, PATRIOT Act, Department of Homeland Security, etc.)
At the same time, Ford confronted these exact issues within his White House. His first cabinet meeting was devoted to discussing Nixon’s fate, his secretaries faced questions about it wherever they went and Nixon holdovers like Alexander Haig and Henry Kissinger hounded Ford about the matter (Greene 1995, 45). Ford’s goal was not to excuse his former boss from justice; his goal was to find a way out so that both he and the country could move on from the traumas of Watergate. Ford’s opinions on Nixon himself were irrelevant. “My fundamental decision to grant a pardon had nothing to do with any sympathy I might feel for Nixon personally or any concern I might have for the state of his health… public policy demanded that I put Nixon- and Watergate- behind us as quickly as possible,” Ford wrote (Ford 1979, 173). And, as shown in chapter ten, Ford’s speech announcing the pardon on September 8, 1974 was in reality the middle, not the end, of the new president’s campaign to accomplish this larger objective.

From this list of presidential objectives, my next step consisted of determining which of these goals involved the use of instrumental religious rhetoric. The sequence and logic of this section are very easy to understand if the reader keeps the following in mind. First, I had to develop a way to identify a religious reference. After that, I had to develop a way to identify a religious speech. And finally I had to develop a way to identify a religious rhetorical strategy. A president made a religious reference if his language met one of the following two coding rules:

- Must meet 1 of 2

  1) Does the president make explicit reference to religious figures or texts?
2) *Does the president make reference to well known religious beliefs or concepts?*

Rule one captures the obvious ones. This would include if a president mentions God, talks about Christ, quotes the Bible, and so on.

The second rule is trickier. The key part of the rule is the phrase “well known.” For America may be many things, but a nation of religious scholars it is not. Only half of American adults can name one of the four Gospels. Just one-third of people know that it was Jesus who gave the Sermon on the Mount. Fully ten percent of individuals think Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife (Prothero 2007, 38-39).

In an extensive recent survey of religious knowledge, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2010) found that in general people are not even familiar with the most significant principles of their own faith, let alone those of the others. Only 55% of Catholics were aware that their Church teaches that the bread and wine used in Communion actually become the body and blood of Christ, a doctrine known as transubstantiation. Similarly, only 28% of self-identified white evangelicals associated the teaching that salvation comes from faith alone with Protestantism (24). Perhaps most embarrassing of all for the churched, atheists and agnostics had the highest average score! A typical atheist/agnostic got about three more questions right than a white evangelical did (6).

None of this is to say that America is not a very religious nation- it most certainly is. About 60% of U.S. adults claim that religion is “very important” in their lives. About 40% attend religious services at least once a week (7). 37% of Americans say they read the Bible or another holy book at least one time per week outside of services (12). A majority of people
claim to read the Bible at least two times every month (Prothero 2007, 38). 54% of Americans pray daily (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2011, 31). Relative to politics, a greater number of citizens identify with a religious denomination than a political party and that same citizen is more likely to try to evangelize than they are to try to influence another’s vote (12). Most impressive of all, 91% of Americans say they believe in God (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010, 66).

Furthermore, religion has always been an enormously influential part of popular culture. Christian themes and references are found in the recordings of some of the most iconic musicians of all time. Prince is particularly known for his blurring of the sacred and the secular. His hit song “Let’s Go Crazy” opens as if he is a priest, officiating at a wedding while he glorifies the prospect of the afterlife (Till 2010). One academic has gone so far as to say that the strong religious themes of two of Madonna’s music videos, “Like a Prayer” and “Open Your Heart,” count as two of the most influential examples of liberation theology in all of American society (Hulsether 2005). Other extraordinarily popular musicians known for their strong Christian imagery and lyrics include Bob Dylan and the band U2.

On TV, any Trekker could tell you that Star Trek recurrently explores the role of religion in intergalactic society, much more sympathetically, too, in its later iterations (Porter and McLaren 1999). Reaching a wider audience than Star Trek, ABC’s critically adored Lost had a story adapted in many ways straight from the Bible. Several characters were named after Biblical figures (Jacob, Aaron), each person on the island is being punished in some way for
their sins and the show ends with most of the players walking through the doors of a church leading to a bright light, presumably that of Heaven.

Religious culture also sells. Mel Gibson’s brutal film *The Passion of the Christ* grossed over $600 million. Other films with overt religious subjects such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Da Vinci Code* have also been recent blockbusters. And it earns critical praise. Kanye West raps in the song “Jesus Walks,” “They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus / That means guns, sex, lies, video tapes / But if I talk about God my record won’t get played, huh?” Apparently not; the song took home the Grammy for best rap song.

Although this may seem like a digression, the point in an important one. The idea is that just about everyone in the country will have seen one of her Madgesty’s videos, listened to a Prince or Kanye West song, watched an episode of *Lost* or went to see *Narnia* and so on. This makes all of us, regardless of our beliefs, potentially receptive to political ideas that are wrapped in a religious packaging. It is a terminology that we are familiar with and can easily grasp.

Thus it is reasonable to assume that most Americans would be able to identify concepts such as sin, salvation, brotherhood, forgiveness and the like, concepts that the second criteria above is meant to signify, as ideas with strong religious foundations, even if they would not be able to explicitly or coherently explain them. As poor as the results to the knowledge questions of the Pew survey seem, there is another side. While the report proves without a doubt that Americans do not know everything about religion, they also prove that everyone knows at least something about it. The average person got exactly half of the 32 possible correct answers.
Only 6 out of the 3,412 respondents failed to get any questions right (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010b, 16).

At the same time, it is clearly unreasonable to assume that most Americans are picking up on what has been called “dog-whistle” politics, the use of coded religious communication that is only meant to be recognized and understood by a narrow subset of the population (Albertson 2006). The appearance of a phrase like “wonder-working power” in George W. Bush’s 2003 State of the Union is a wink very few people, myself included, would be liable to catch. The hope is that the second of my two rules helps me to successfully straddle this line.

One other point to note is that in my analyses I will often cite passages from the Bible and/or detail religious doctrine. I am not suggesting that the public is always consciously making these connections themselves. Instead, I am including this material because it helps to contextualize the president’s message. All that I am suggesting is that Americans recognize that that message is somehow, somewhere, rooted in religion.

The religious references meeting either of these two criteria were identified by means of a comprehensive search of the public papers of the president, now available online courtesy of the University of California, Santa Barbara’s American Presidency Project (see http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu). What distinguishes this search from many others (for example, Domke and Coe 2008) is that I did not begin by searching the database for religious words or concepts (i.e. reading all the papers where the word “God” appears or the like). There is no possible way that anyone could generate a comprehensive list of all the religious words a president might use. Nor could anyone hope to capture in simple search terms the complexity of
some religious ideas. Instead, I began by searching the database for terms related to the objective, say, for example “energy” or “civil rights.” I then carefully read the president’s discourse on the topic, examining the content of the speeches for religious references that met one of the two standards listed above.

However, a one shot religious reference would not be enough for me to classify the speech as having made a religious argument. Kennedy, for example, once said at a dinner in Philadelphia in 1963, “‘Cast me not off in the time of old age,’ says the Psalmist in the Bible, and we intend to see to it that in modern times no American is forgotten or ill-treated or cast off by this country in his time of old age” (Kennedy 1963i). He was talking about Social Security and other policies intended for the benefit of senior citizens. But, he never once returned to the Bible nor did he ever expand on this point. Therefore, this is an example not of a religious speech but instead an example of a religious reference.

To be considered a religious speech, a speech had to meet an additional set of criteria:

- If reference meets 1 or 2, the speech containing it must also meet
  3) Is the religious language a focus of a full section of the speech or is it recurrently found throughout the address?

Finally, for the president to be considered as having used a religious rhetorical strategy, the following two criteria must be met:

4) Is the religious language used in a major presidential address?

5) Is the religious language used in at least three minor addresses?
These rules immediately raise the question as to what qualifies as a “major” address. Ragsdale (2009, 172) defines a major address as a speech that is “delivered to a national audience during evening listening hours.” I reject the requirement that the speech be in the evening. For me, the only important factor is that the speech was nationally broadcast. Based on her rules, Ragsdale does not consider Eisenhower’s speech on December 23, 1959 a major address; it was delivered at 5 PM. But it was also carried live on nationwide TV and radio and was broadcast overseas in twenty-eight different languages (Kenworthy 1959). I simply cannot see how such a speech could be classified as anything but “major.”

The rationale for requiring religious language to appear in a major speech is to ensure that the entire country is exposed to the argument. We cannot well expect religious rhetoric to have an impact if few people hear it. Furthermore, presidents prepare a great deal for their major addresses and thus the use of religious language in any of these speeches is anything but a casual decision.

The rationale for requiring religious language to appear in three minor speeches, as well, is included because, again, what I am trying to conceptualize is a religious rhetorical strategy. “Strategy” implies repetition, persistence. It is a plan of action that is decided upon in advance and then executed. If religion were only to be found in a major address that would not be a strategy; it would just be a single speech.

Overall, all of these decisions are sensible. A religious reference must be explicit or well known. A religious speech must include a full section of religious content or be marked by a
recurring religious theme. A religious rhetorical strategy must include at least one major and three minor addresses. All total, exactly nine presidential objectives meet these criteria.

**How Cases Were Evaluated**

When was a religious rhetorical strategy successful? That is the next and equally important question. To reiterate, my point of departure is the assumption that a successful use of a religious rhetorical strategy would lead to an improvement in the president’s three most important political relationships— with the public, with the media and with Congress. I have developed a set of consistent measures to gauge the effects of religious rhetoric within each of these vectors.

The first set of measures deal with public opinion, both the president’s personal approval ratings and those questions measuring his performance on the specific objective he is campaigning for. If a religious rhetorical strategy is successful, then both of these metrics should move in the president’s favored direction.

One specific element I pay attention to is the change in the president’s approval over the course of the campaign. It will not be possible to use this information in every case. Eisenhower’s campaign for mutual security funding shows why. As the reader will learn in the following chapter, Ike tried to mobilize support for foreign aid on and off for his entire second term. Obviously we cannot learn anything about the effectiveness of religious rhetoric from a four year time series of approval data. Rather, this tactic will be used only for campaigns of a shorter duration.
In contrast, one use of approval ratings that will be important in every case is a comparison between the last measurement taken before a major religious speech and the first measurement taken after it. This method is equivalent to one of the techniques Edwards (2003, 29-34) uses to see if a president was able to move public opinion. I will keep in mind his standard of judgment as well; a 6 point increase is the benchmark for having some confidence that the speech led to a statistically significant improvement in the president’s standing (29).

As for issue opinion, data on the president’s handling of a specific problem is sometimes unavailable. Either the question was not asked or it was not asked enough. However, where possible, I do chart questions targeted on a presidential objective for the duration of a campaign. Does the public start to move to the president’s position? I only use identically worded questions that have been asked repeatedly since it has been shown that this is the best way to track changes in collective opinion while controlling for certain response biases (see Page and Shapiro 1992).

The second set of measures explores the president’s relationship with the media. Can religious rhetoric help him win better coverage? The best way to answer this question, I argue, is by examining the editorial reaction to a major address where the president employed a religious argument. Beat reporters strive for objectivity in their writing and the regular news cycle is too heavily influenced by events to be of much use. During the Gulf War a story on a military setback would reflect poorly on the president, for sure, but that negative coverage would not say anything about the reception of the president’s religious argument. In contrast, opinion pieces directly respond to a speech and they are likely to comment on both its political and its rhetorical content. We would expect positive reactions towards each if religious rhetoric was successful.
I began by searching the archives of four newspapers- the Chicago Tribune, the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times and the Washington Post- for all editorials covering the objective published the week after a major religious speech. Search terms were meant to be as broad as possible.

The New York Times and the Washington Post were selected because they are recognized as the nation’s two most prestigious newspapers when it comes to political reporting. They attract a national audience and are read closely by Beltway types. The New York Times, for one, occupies a uniquely prominent role in the U.S. political system. Because the Times is considered authoritative by the other players in the media universe it is extensively read by the editors, reporters and pundits who are responsible for producing content for their own outlets. As a consequence, there is a trickle-down effect whereby the material and opinions first found in the pages of the Times often wind up reaching a wider audience (Page 1996, 17). The Los Angeles Times and the Chicago Tribune were included for geographic diversity. Hopefully this approach yields a somewhat reasonable estimate of the national editorial reaction.

Each op-ed was evaluated on five point scale. An article would be assigned a score based on how positive or negative it was from the perspective of the president. The scale is as follows:

1 = Completely Negative
2 = Somewhat Negative
3 = Mixed or Neutral
4 = Somewhat Positive
5 = *Completely Positive*

These scores are then used to produce an average measure of editorial coverage. It also is possible to break down the distribution of articles (i.e. what percent of pieces were negative).

The method I have outlined is fairly standard practice for research that attempts to gauge the tone of media coverage. Dalton, Beck and Huckfeldt (1998), Druckman and Parkin (2005) and Kahn and Kenney (2002) all elect to code coverage based on some sliding scale of positive to negative. I believe my selection is the best possible option for two reasons. First, it should produce more reliable results than something like the Dalton, Beck and Huckfeldt method, which is a 7 point scale running from negative to positive. I think it could be difficult, on their scale, to tell the difference between a 5, 6, or 7, or, conversely, a 3, 2 or a 1. Making this fine a distinction between positively and negatively slanted coverage is troublesome. However, I do believe it is possible to tell the difference between something that is “somewhat positive” and something that is “completely positive.” Second, my system should produce more precise information than an approach like the Kahn and Kenney or the Druckman and Parkin methods, both of which merely label an article as positive, negative or neutral, for basically the opposite reason. I think we can be more precise than this. A five point scale truly hits the sweet spot.

The last set of data concentrates on the president’s relationship with Congress. First, I will look at the appropriate roll call votes and see how the president did. If a religious rhetorical strategy works, we would expect the votes to be solid victories. A second way of gauging how successful a religious rhetorical strategy was with Congress lies in the final outcome. Does it
represent what the president campaigned for? My hypothesis is that a successful use of a religious strategy will result in a final outcome closely reflecting the president’s priorities.

To review, in each of my nine cases of an instrumental use of religious rhetoric, I will be collecting and interpreting the following data:

- Approval change over the course of the campaign
- Approval change before and after a major religious speech
- Issue opinion change over the course of the campaign
- Tone of editorial coverage after a major religious speech
- Congressional roll call results
- The content of the final policy

The following chapters are broken into sections that reflect the grouping of issues where instrumental religious rhetoric has appeared. First, I consider the national security cases, then I turn to the civil rights cases and finally I finish with the presidential scandals. All in all, the conclusions will be the same: instrumental religious rhetoric does not work. We first get a glimpse of this finding in the next chapter, an analysis of Eisenhower’s religious rhetoric on the mutual security program.
Chapter 4

The Brotherhood of Man: Dwight Eisenhower’s Religious Rhetoric on Mutual Security Funding

Of all the men who have occupied the highest office, Dwight David Eisenhower was quite possibly the most strategic in the means and extent to which he drew on religion to further his political goals. It is very telling that contemporaries could criticize Eisenhower both for being too religious and for not being religious enough- and that both charges could have a ring of truth to them. For many years, Eisenhower’s political skills were maligned by observers of his administration. A popular idea had that his de-facto chief of staff, the powerful Sherman Adams, ran the country while Ike spent his days idling around the greens and fairways of various golf courses. That perception, however, has recently begun to change.

Greenstein’s (1982) research contradicts the impression that Eisenhower was a good man but a disinterested leader, a presider rather than a president. He explains how Eisenhower’s main skill was being able to successfully blend his roles as a symbol of national unity and as a divisive political actor. He did so by concealing his political side, by operating in a “hidden-hand” style. Thus Eisenhower’s press conferences were vague and inarticulate but behind closed doors his language was precise. He claimed to be non-partisan and refused to “engage in personalities” but his actions demonstrated a highly refined sense of political motivations and consequences. His smile, symbolically, overlay a ferocious temper. Sometimes Eisenhower’s machinations failed, like when he clumsily tried to coerce Nixon into leaving the ticket in 1956. But at other times it is hard to see how any other approach would have produced better results. The way in
which he undermined Sen. Joe McCarthy behind the scenes while refusing to joust with him
publicly is a case in point.

Eisenhower’s use of religious rhetoric certainly syncs with Greenstein’s image of the
General’s leadership style. Talking in religious terms allowed Eisenhower to maintain his broad
popularity while possibly helping him subtly accomplish his goals. In truth, Eisenhower was “a
far more complex and devious man than most people realized.” It was none other than Richard
Nixon who said that. And he certainly would know (Boyle 2005, 20).

In terms of religious practices, Eisenhower may very well have been the most outwardly
religious president of modern times. Notably, he began his first inaugural with a prayer he had
written himself after attending church services on the morning of his installation. It took him
just ten minutes to compose it. Nevertheless, the prayer was very well received and the
administration received so many requests for copies that the Republican Party eventually printed
and distributed it. Later, M. Robert Rogers, chairman of the President’s Committee for Arts and
Sciences, would even set the prayer to music (Bergman 2009, 262).

The prayer was nothing unusual; Eisenhower developed a habit of opening each cabinet
meeting with one. Likewise, he searched for appointees with strong religious convictions,
especially admiring his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, as well as his Secretary of
Agriculture, Ezra Taft Benson, a member of the Mormon Church’s Council of Twelve (and later
its President). Eisenhower went a step further by asking the Congregational minister Rev. Fox

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3 As an aside, Eisenhower’s admiration for Dulles was rather exclusive. Dulles’ frequent moralizing, his apocalyptic
language, his inflexibility, his arrogance and his cold personality made him an extremely unpopular figure in the
Capitol. “Dull, duller, Dulles” was a common saying of the time.
to join his staff as a special assistant. Fox helped to advise the President on religious matters and he regularly added biblical wisdom to Eisenhower’s speeches (264).

Though his administration did not start it, Eisenhower also helped to establish and organize the National Day of Prayer. He was the first president to send out Christmas cards, mailing 1,100 of them in 1953. By comparison, President George W. Bush would mail out over a million (263). He attended church regularly. He helped create an organization called the Foundation for Religious Action which attempted, albeit mostly without success, to unite people in a spiritual crusade against Communism (Smith 2006, 222, 232). Of course, it was also under Eisenhower’s lead that the first annual presidential prayer breakfast was held, that the words “under God” were added to the Pledge of Allegiance and that the phrase “In God We Trust” was made the national motto.

No one should doubt Eisenhower’s personal faith. The Eisenhower home in Abilene, Kansas was a very religious place. Eisenhower’s parents, David and Ida, were well-known Jehovah’s Witnesses, then called “Russellites” or “Bible Students.” The Eisenhowers had turned to the Witnesses in grief after the death of their eight month old son, Paul, in 1895. Ida and David were comforted by the Witness prophesy that Armageddon would occur in 1914, meaning they would be reunited with their departed son shortly. Many members of the family were understandably disillusioned when the world didn’t end in 1914. Still, Ida continued to be involved with the Witnesses until her death in 1946 and she regularly hosted meetings and services in their house. Eisenhower thus grew up in a family where the Bible was read together, where prayers were said before every meal and where certain activities like drinking, gambling
and swearing were discouraged. Although Eisenhower himself, like his father and brothers, left the Witnesses and renounced many of their teachings, he retained a respect for the simple values he had learned as a child and an abiding belief in God. Prayer did remain an important part of his life. There are a litany of stories where Ike was caught in the act, but, as he told a friend at the end of the war: “Do you think I could have fought my way through this war, ordered thousands of fellows to their deaths, if I couldn’t have got down on my knees and talked to God and begged him to support me and make me feel that what I was doing was right for myself and the world?” (Smith 2006, 227).

At the same time, it is undeniable that every religious action Eisenhower undertook, that every religious word Eisenhower ever spoke as president, were things he did with political purposes in mind, and not merely manifestations of his own personal faith. Despite his spirituality, prior to becoming president Eisenhower was not in any real way involved in organized religion. On his own for the first time as a cadet at West Point, Eisenhower did not participate in any religious activities, whether church services, Sunday school, Bible study or even the YMCA. Over the course of his extensive career in the Army, Eisenhower was stationed across the world and only occasionally found the time to attend chapel. Eisenhower’s biographer Stephen Ambrose (1984, 38) writes, “He did not think the denomination important. Theology was a subject about which he knew nothing and cared nothing; he never discussed his idea of God with anyone.”

Nevertheless, as he began to contemplate a run for the presidency in 1952, Eisenhower and his staff worried that his lack of affiliation with a church would cost him votes. Still,
Eisenhower resisted. He thought that to join a church at such a late date in his life would smack of hypocrisy. Most accounts say that he was finally convinced otherwise by a conversation with the writer Clare Boothe Luce who reminded Eisenhower that he needed to set a good example for the country. How difficult would it be for parents to get their children out of bed and into their Sunday best, Luce wondered, if the kids could say the President doesn’t go to church so why should they?

Therefore, in February of 1953 Eisenhower was baptized in a private ceremony, joining the high-profile National Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC. His wife, Mamie, had been raised as Presbyterian. Eisenhower was sixty-three years old. From that point on, Eisenhower attended regularly, donated a substantial amount of his own money to the congregation and actively participated in services. In 1959, Eisenhower actually invited Nikita Khrushchev to go with him. Khrushchev, predictably, declined.

One can easily understand why Luce’s argument about setting an example was persuasive to Eisenhower. Eisenhower repeatedly talked in public about how the United States had three pillars of strength- military, economic and moral/spiritual. As President, he felt part of his job description was providing spiritual leadership. As his speechwriter Stanley High admitted, Eisenhower hoped “to inspire a spiritual reawakening in America” (Bergman 2009, 265). To Eisenhower, our entire political system was founded on the age-old ideals of faith and religion. He once told a national radio and television audience in 1954, “Now I don’t think it amiss... that we call attention to this fact: that in conception, our Nation had a spiritual foundation, so announced by the men who wrote the Declaration of Independence. You remember what they
said? ‘We hold that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain rights.’ That is very
definitely a spiritual conception” (Eisenhower 1954). More famously, perhaps, Eisenhower told
a campaign audience in 1952, “Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply
felt religious faith- and I don’t care what it is.” Eisenhower’s feelings on the subject did not go
much deeper than that. A short anecdote proves the point. When asked about his religion by a
friend, Eisenhower dug into his pocket and produced a coin. One side was inscribed with the
word “Freedom,” the other with the word “God.” “That coin,” Eisenhower claimed, “represents
my religion” (Perret 1999, 428).

There were certainly some, like the public commentator and scholar William Lee Miller
(1964), who criticized Eisenhower at the time for his newfound embrace of religious ritual, for
the vagueness of his beliefs, for the rigidity his positions implied. By and large, though,
Eisenhower’s religious predilections were well in keeping with the public mood of the 1950s.

The most common way that Eisenhower utilized religious rhetoric was by demonizing the
atheist Soviets. For instance, Eisenhower opened his 1955 State of the Union by presenting his
take on the basis for the Cold War. He told the American public:

At the outset, I believe it would be well to remind ourselves of this great
fundamental in our national life: our common belief that every human being
is divinely endowed with dignity and worth and inalienable rights. This
faith, with its corollary- that to grow and flourish people must be free-
shapes the interests and aspirations of every American…

It is of the utmost importance, that each of us understand the true nature of
the struggle now taking place in the world.

It is not a struggle merely of economic theories, or of forms of government,
or of military power. At issue is the true nature of man. Either man is the
creature whom the Psalmist described as ‘a little lower than the angels,’
crowned with glory and honor, holding ‘dominion over the works’ of his Creator; or man is a soulless, animated machine to be enslaved, used and consumed by the state for its own glorification.

It is, therefore, a struggle which goes to the roots of the human spirit, and its shadow falls across the long sweep of man’s destiny. This prize, so precious, so fraught with ultimate meaning, is the true object of the contending forces in the world. (Eisenhower 1955)

In this speech, Eisenhower very coherently argues that the Cold War is at its heart a religious struggle, and not a political or economic one. The way that this statement is constructed, to argue that Eisenhower was wrong would be to argue that the Bible itself, that that description by the Psalmist, was wrong. That would be a difficult case to make today, no less so than in the 1950s.

In a little plainer language, Eisenhower made this same point in a press conference held in March of 1956: “I have in public talks pointed out that this is, underneath it all, a battle between those people who believe that man is something more than just an educated animal and those who believe he is nothing else. That is exactly what it is. It is atheism against some kind of religion” (Eisenhower 1956a). This opinion was one Eisenhower would often express.

Depicting the Cold War as a battle between atheism and religion allowed Eisenhower to also express confidence in its eventual outcome. One side was on the side of God, the other was not. The winner was obvious, as Eisenhower told the graduates of Baylor in 1956:

Communism denies the spiritual premises on which your education has been based. According to that doctrine, there is no God; there is no soul in man; there is no reward beyond the satisfaction of daily needs. Consequently, toward the human being, Communism is cruel, intolerant, materialistic. This doctrine, committed to conquest by lure, by intimidation and by force, seeks to destroy the political concepts and institutions that we hold to be dearer than life itself. Thus Communism poses a threat from
which even this mighty nation is not wholly immune.

Yet, my friends, Communism is, in deepest sense, a gigantic failure.

Even in the countries it dominates, hundreds of millions who dwell there still cling to their religious faith; still are moved by aspirations for justice and freedom that cannot be answered merely by more steel or by bigger bombers; still seek a reward that is beyond money or place or power; still dream of the day that they may walk fearlessly in the fullness of human freedom.

The destiny of man is freedom and justice under his Creator. Any ideology that denies this universal faith will ultimately perish or be recast. This is the first great truth that must underlie all our thinking, all our striving in this struggling world (Eisenhower 1956b)

Eisenhower’s broad religious comments on the Cold War were linked to a much more targeted and precise policy campaign. All the negative religious rhetoric aimed at the Soviets set the stage for Eisenhower to extensively use overt religious themes and arguments to drum up support for his controversial program of foreign assistance. This aid would be going, naturally, to those countries that opposed the Godless communists. Every speech in which Eisenhower criticized the Soviets for their atheism must be seen as helping to create a context in which he could make a faith based argument for helping other countries who did share our religious beliefs. Sometimes, he would make this connection explicit. Part of Eisenhower’s stated rationale for aiding the countries of the Middle East was, as he said, “The Middle East is the birthplace of three great religions- Moslem, Christian and Hebrew. Mecca and Jerusalem are more than places on the map. They symbolize religions which teach that the spirit has supremacy over matter and that the individual has a dignity and rights of which no despotic government can
rightfully deprive him. It would be intolerable if the holy places of the Middle East should be subjected to a rule that glorifies atheistic materialism” (Eisenhower 1957a).

To understand why foreign aid was controversial, it is necessary to provide some context. The reality is that U.S. foreign assistance had taken on a distinctively different character following the outbreak of the Korean War. In the Mutual Security Act of 1951, Congress abolished the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA), which had heretofore overseen the country’s foreign aid expenditures, and replaced it with the Mutual Security Agency (MSA). The ECA had been intended as a temporary body that would help promote the economic recovery of countries ravaged by World War II. The MSA, in contrast, reflected the evolving perception that U.S.-Soviet tension was likely to be a permanent feature of the post-war socio-political landscape. The MSA consequently had a much more pronounced bias towards military objectives.

But the question of whether the U.S. should allocate any foreign aid at all was increasingly debated. Many political figures felt the Marshall Plan had achieved its goals—by the early 1950s Europe was far along the road to economic recovery—and hence suggested that perhaps the US should eliminate foreign aid entirely. Eisenhower himself was an avowed fiscal conservative who initially thought that foreign growth could be achieved by the reduction of trade barriers and the creation of incentives for private investment. “Trade not aid” might best describe Eisenhower’s initial foreign economic policies (Kaufman 1982).

By the end of his first term, however, Eisenhower had experienced a change of heart. Events such as the French defeat in Asia and the stirrings of nationalism worldwide made the
Administration leery of the possibility of a wave of Communist takeovers. Even more disconcerting was the new Soviet economic aid offensive. After Stalin’s death in 1953, the Soviet leadership had embraced new policies that sought to expand Soviet influence throughout the Third World. The new Soviet rulers, particularly Khrushchev, believed that socialist movements could gain power not just through revolutions but also via parliamentary means. Top officials made high profile visits to countries like Burma and India, where they promised extensive economic assistance. They delivered on these promises by issuing large, long-term, low-interest loans to countries like Afghanistan, Egypt and Indonesia.

Eisenhower was not persuaded that the Soviets were acting out of the goodness of their hearts. As he told his friend Lewis Douglas, it “was idle to suppose” that the Soviet Union had “any friendly interest in the countries that she proposes to help.” Rather, he believed that Moscow wanted to undermine U.S. ties to certain governments and to use their “economic penetration to accomplish political domination” (66-67). Eisenhower responded by advocating much more generous and comprehensive aid for the underdeveloped world. His total mutual security request for the 1957 fiscal year was $4.67 billion, an increase of almost $2 billion over the funds that had been appropriated for fiscal 1956.

The White House was caught unprepared by the firestorm that ensued. They expected to encounter opposition to some of their requests, like for aid to India, a non-aligned country with a centrally controlled economy, but they also believed the package would win ultimate approval. Instead, they ran into widespread opposition from leaders on both sides of the aisle. Fiscal conservatives saw mutual security as a worthless giveaway that lacked any defined metrics for
measuring whether it was successful or not. Many isolationist Republicans had been eager to reduce the country’s foreign obligations for quite some time, regardless of their cost. But these conservatives were now joined by many liberal Democrats who were increasingly discomfited by the idea that mutual security was gradually becoming a permanent program free of constraints. Some even thought that the Soviets’ increased effort in this area was reason enough to reduce instead of expand America’s aid programs. As a Wisconsin House member remarked, “If we are so foolish as to enter into a competitive economic aid race with the Communists, we will come out second best. We know they can offer a sales program that promises the moon or everything that the people of Asia desire.” (69). For others, cutting foreign aid was almost a form of sport. Otto Passman (D-LA) once told a State Department official, “Son, I don’t smoke and I don’t drink. My only pleasure in life is kicking the shit out of the foreign aid program of the United States of America” (Pach and Richardson 1991, 165).

In the end, Congress reduced the Administration’s request by around $1 billion. The 1956 debate over mutual security had raised so many pressing questions that both branches of Congress and the White House had authorized independent reviews of the program. Eisenhower was certainly willing to make changes. He had already been moving in the direction of favoring development over military assistance. His funding request in February 1957 continued that trend as for the first time since the outbreak of the Korean War the White House asked for more money for its economic programs ($2.1 billion) than for military hardware ($1.8 billion). But even beyond this, at the start of his second term Eisenhower sought fundamental changes in the way the mutual security program was structured. For one, he proposed a Developmental Loan
Fund of $2 billion to be spread over a three year period. This money was meant to furnish easy long-term loans to Third World countries. He also requested permanent authority to provide technical assistance to other countries and the President additionally called for a $300 million emergency fund that he could use at his own discretion.

Eisenhower would battle fiercely for these changes and for the continued funding of mutual security for the remainder of his time in office. A variety of circumstances troubled him - the rise of nationalist movements, the new Soviet aid policies, the growing domestic opposition. Ike believed that mutual security was an essential United States program and that it was under an unjustified assault. In the midst of this desperate atmosphere, Eisenhower made a conscious decision in 1957 to launch an “educational” campaign aimed at convincing the public of the validity of his position. In the course of doing so, Eisenhower would make a multitude of arguments in favor of foreign aid. The President claimed that loans and grants to foreign countries would increase U.S. security since the country could not possibly confront the Communist threat without help from strong allies. Foreign aid would also ultimately save money, Eisenhower held, by helping other countries build up their own defenses, thus reducing the need for America to spend so much on its own. Additionally, foreign aid would provide an economic benefit, too, by boosting the economies of potential trade partners.

But Eisenhower made one other argument repeatedly and it was a patently religious one; that being that as a Christian nation America had an obligation to help the less fortunate. While discussing a proposed grant to Pakistan in an earlier press conference, Eisenhower admitted as much: “I believe now that we have a moral value involved…Now, you say, ‘all right, if it is not
socialistic, it is based on a purely humanitarian thing’- and I believe George Kennan argues that humanitarian and moralistic values have no place in foreign relations. But after all, we do believe that we are a product and a representative of the Judaic-Christian civilization, and it does teach some concern for your brother. And I believe in that” (Eisenhower 1953b).

We can pinpoint the precise date when Eisenhower began framing mutual security in religious terms, his second inaugural address (Eisenhower 1957b). Eisenhower devoted the entirety of the speech to theme of the world’s mutual interdependence. He summed up the gist of his message in one brief line, “For one truth must rule all we think and all we do. No people can live to itself alone.” The New York Times commented that “it proclaimed, indeed, a kind of new deal for the undernourished nations of the earth, going well beyond the domestic New and Fair Deals...” (Reston 1957). As in his more well-known first inaugural, Ike opened with a personal prayer:

Before all else, we seek, upon our common labor as a nation, the blessings of Almighty God. And the hopes in our hearts fashion the deepest prayers of our whole people.

May we pursue the right- without self-righteousness.

May we know unity- without conformity.

May we grow in strength- without pride in self.

May we, in our dealings with all peoples of the earth, ever speak truth and serve justice.

And so shall America- in the sight of all men of good will- prove true to the honorable purposes that bind and rule us as a people in all this time of trial through which we pass.
Having thus explicitly asked for God’s help in guiding and fulfilling his agenda, Eisenhower proceeded to explain what he hoped to accomplish during his second four years in office. It was a very normative goal: “We look upon this shaken earth, and we declare our firm and fixed purpose- the building of a peace with justice in a world where moral law prevails.” To build such a moral world would require that the American people be willing to pay the price of peace; specific costs of foreign aid which Eisenhower outlined in some detail. He supplements this language with frequent use of easily identifiable Christian metaphors such as “sacrifice calmly borne,” an allusion to Christ’s crucifixion, “burdened shoulders,” an allusion to Christ’s bearing of the cross, and “brotherhood of all.”

Brotherhood, in particular, is an important Christian concept, and a concept which Eisenhower frequently related to foreign aid. It is rather ironic that in the Bible biological brothers are often deceitful villains. For instance, Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, murdered his brother, Abel, when his offering to God was rejected. Or the brothers of Joseph, who sold their father’s more favored son into slavery in Egypt. Metaphorical brotherhood is something different. It is the most familiar analogy for the family of God. It signifies an egalitarian relationship of love and service. It was also something on which Jesus was very direct: “And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Mt 12: 49-50).

Finally, the President also made extensive use of light/dark imagery in this address in order to impress upon his listeners the fundamental goodness and morality of America as opposed to the evil designs of the USSR. The Soviets are described as “dark in purpose.” The
countries under Communist control are living through “the night of their bondage” and are depicted as “darkened lands.” In contrast, the U.S. represents “the light of freedom” that will “flame brightly.” This duality is a fairly common feature of much of Eisenhower’s Cold War rhetoric. The conflict between light and darkness is an easily recognizable Biblical theme as well. It is always God who conquers the darkness. As the apostle Paul wrote, “For it is God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God…” (2 Cor 4: 6). Therefore, in a way, by associating the U.S. with light, Eisenhower is also implicitly connecting it with God.

Eisenhower would expand upon this religious conception of mutual security in a major radio and television address on the program that coming May (Eisenhower 1957c). Again, as aforementioned, Eisenhower would offer many different points of support for his policy proposals. But the religious overtones were still readily apparent. As the President remarked in the middle of the address:

We do seek to help other peoples to become strong and stay free- and learn, through living in freedom, how to conquer poverty, how to know the blessings of peace and progress.

This purpose- I repeat- serves our own national interest.

It also reflects our own national character. We are stirred not only by calculations of self-interest but also by decent regard for the needs and the hopes of all our fellowmen. I am proud of this fact, as you are. None of us would wish it to be otherwise.

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4 Consider, for example, Eisenhower’s “The Chance for Peace” speech in 1953, a speech that is often regarded as his finest (Eisenhower 1953a). At various times, the Soviets are associated with “the shadow of fear,” “the cloud of threatening war” and “the black tide of events.” Additionally, this speech contains one of Eisenhower’s starkest Christian metaphors: “humanity hanging from a cross of iron.” Chernus (2008, 29-51) has a very intelligent and well informed discussion of this speech and the story behind it.
This is not mere sentimentality. This is the very nature of America realistically understood and applied.

If ever we were to lose our sense of brotherhood, of kinship with all free men, we would have entered upon our nation’s period of decline. Without vision- without a quick sense of justice and compassion- no people can claim greatness.

First, this passage is a direct appeal to the conscience of the American public. Eisenhower is more or less claiming that the country is obligated to support mutual security because it is in tune with our values of justice and compassion, values that on numerous other occasions he has made clear derive from America’s religious traditions.

Second, once more, we see a reference to “brotherhood.”

Third, Ike associates mutual security with God in the sense that a goal of the program is to help others “know the blessings of peace and progress.” Peace and progress are a gift from God. By means of mutual security, Eisenhower is saying America can help him spread those gifts throughout the world. Eisenhower explains the goal of mutual security in terms of “blessings” on two other occasions in the text. At the start, “And we must demonstrate and spread the blessings of liberty- to be cherished by those who enjoy these blessings, to be sought by those now denied them.” And later, “I know of no more sound or necessary investment that our Nation can make… to securing the blessing of liberty.”

Interestingly, in his May address, Eisenhower also claimed that the fundamental purpose of the mutual security program was “to help these people to help themselves.” Although this phrase is not from the Bible, most Americans think that it is. It is the most widely quoted
Biblical verse in the United States, but the words are actually Ben Franklin’s (Prothero 2007, 11, 296).

In many other minor speeches, Eisenhower would continue to advance the arguments he first made in these two addresses. Frequently, he would emphasize the importance of the Golden Rule, so named because it was seen as essential wisdom from Jesus: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” (Mt 7: 12). For instance, as he defended mutual security before the National Conference on the Foreign Aspects of National Security in 1958, Eisenhower said, “If anyone, then, wants to judge this entire program only on a ‘what’s-in-it-for-me’ basis, he can find all the justification he needs. But beyond this, if others want to add another element, ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,’ I see no reason to apologize for acknowledging this kind of motive” (Eisenhower 1958).

Before a similar gathering two years later, Eisenhower again returned to the idea of Christian brotherhood as a justification for mutual security (Eisenhower 1960c). The President explained, “Only by thinking of ourselves, and truly conducting ourselves, as brothers under God with those who, with us, want to live and grow in freedom, can we hope to solve problems in which failure will mean disaster for much of humanity… There, in those few words, is the very heart of mutual security.”

At times, Eisenhower was even more explicit about why America’s religious beliefs made it incumbent upon the nation to offer generous foreign aid. A notable example was his nationally broadcast speech at the Pageant of Peace Ceremonies in 1959 (Eisenhower 1959b).
Here, Eisenhower chose to opportunistically connect the mutual security program to the meaning and message of Christmas. Having just returned from a trip abroad that took him to eleven different countries, Eisenhower reflected on what he had seen and learned. In this speech, he stressed that the world was, in many ways, “one family” and offered a relatively optimistic vision of the future. But he also reminded his audience that “in the often fierce and even vicious battle for survival- against weather and disease and poverty- some peoples need help.” Why it should be America providing this financial help was shortly made clear:

Yet America’s own best interests- our own hopes for peace- require that we continue our financial investment and aid; and persuade all other free nations to join us- to the limit of their ability- in a long-term program, dependable in its terms and in its duration.

But more importantly- in the spirit of the Christmas season, that there may be peace on earth, and good will among men- we must as individuals, as corporations, labor unions, professional societies, as communities, multiply our interest, our concern in these peoples. They are now our warm friends. They will be our stout and strong partners for peace and friendship in freedom- if they are given the right sort of help in the right sort of spirit…

Protected by our defensive strength against violent disruption of our peaceful efforts, we are trying to produce a workable, practical program that will make each succeeding Christmas a little closer in spirit and reality to the message of the first Christmas long ago…

Together we should consider all the ways and the forms such help might take. I fervently hope that in this Christmas Season each of you who is listening will give thought to what you can do for another human, identical with you in his divine origin and destiny- however distant in miles or poor in worldly estate.

It was a remarkable speech, all the more so because it was not a traditional Christmas proclamation or message. Rather, this was a kind of speech that Eisenhower was accustomed to make both before and after embarking on any foreign trip. Eisenhower merely chose to speak of
Christmas, to connect Christmas to foreign aid, because it suited his purposes. It also was a choice well in keeping with the type of rhetoric he had already used to define the mutual security program in the past.

The Christmas 1959 speech is important as well because it is representative of a last ditch effort Eisenhower mounted in attempt to gain more solid backing for foreign aid expenditures as he entered his last year in office. Eisenhower decided at the end of 1959 to embark on a good will tour across the globe. The stated goals of the journey were to explain America’s positions directly to foreign audiences, to emphasize the country’s peaceful objectives and to capitalize on Eisenhower’s international prestige. There were personal benefits as well, as Eisenhower would get to visit a series of places he already loved or had always dreamed of seeing: Rome, New Delhi, Athens, Tehran, Madrid, Casablanca, Paris, etc. Seeing the Taj Mahal fulfilled a wish Eisenhower had since he was a little boy in Kansas. No treaties or meaningful business was conducted, other than maybe ironing out some misunderstandings with de Gaulle, but none had really been intended, either. From a public relations standpoint, the trip was enormously successful as huge crowds greeted the President at every stop.

Eisenhower used the occasion of his departure as an opportunity to re-emphasize the moral and spiritual obligation underlying mutual security (Eisenhower 1959a). Much of his speech on December 3, 1959 actually focused on a steel industry labor dispute that Eisenhower held out hope of resolving before he left. It is the first half of the address, however, that is most interesting for our purposes. Like so many times before, Eisenhower reminded his listeners of America’s religious foundation. “Our country has been unjustly described as one pursuing only
materialistic goals; as building a culture whose hallmarks are gadgets and shallow pleasures; as prizing wealth above ideals, machines above spirit, leisure above learning, and war above peace,” Eisenhower said. “Actually, as our declaration proclaims, the core of our Nation is belief in a Creator who has endowed all men with inalienable rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In that belief is our country’s true hallmark- a faith that permeates every aspect of our political, social, and family life.” He then went on to openly question whether America was living up to that standard. He acknowledged that “in some respects, we have fallen short of the high ideals held up for us.” He offered a solution, though:

So I earnestly make this suggestion, as I start this journey tonight- that you, and those close to you, join with me in a renewed dedication to our moral and spiritual convictions, and in that light re-examine our own record, including our shortcomings. May this examination inspire each of us so to think and so to act, as to hasten our progress toward the goals our fathers established, which have made America an instrument for good. In this rededication we shall replenish the true source of America’s strength- her faith; and, flowing from it, her love of liberty, her devotion to justice.

So believing, we look on our Nation’s great wealth as more than a hard earned resource to be used only for our own material good. We believe that it should also serve the common good, abroad as well as at home.

Mutual security was praised for offering “hope” and “encouragement” to “a world sorely troubled by an atheistic imperialism.”

What is particularly fascinating about this language is that it bears all the hallmarks of that classic form of quintessentially American rhetoric, the jeremiad. The name, “jeremiad,” is a reference to the seventh through sixth century B.C. Judean prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah’s prophecies are recorded in the book of Jeremiah, a Hebrew text and part of the Old Testament. The organization of the book is difficult to grasp (stylistically, it mixes prose, historical narrative
and biographical material) but the central failing of the Judeans, according to Jeremiah, is that they had broken their covenant with God by worshipping other idols. Their trespass became visible in the social problems that Jeremiah describes, including gross acts of violence. Jeremiah calls for the people to repair this breach by warning them of the impending judgment of God. God’s wrath is vividly depicted as a scorching wind, as eating bitter food, as drinking poisoned water, as the pain of childbirth. However, Jeremiah also offers a muted message of hope. Though skeptical of human nature, Jeremiah envisions a new, more personal relationship with God in the future.

Bearing many similarities to this original message, the jeremiad became a common form of Puritan sermon. When trying to explain the difficulties confronting their parishioners, whether disease or poor harvests or Indian attacks, preachers turned their sights skyward. They claimed that these misfortunes were signs that God was displeased with his “chosen” people. The logic behind this type of conclusion was that the Puritans, in coming to America, had formed a covenant with God and these problems reflected their special standing with him, either as a means of punishment for their failures or as tests of their faith.

From its origins in early America religion, the jeremiad has had a long history in secular literature, ranging from the muckraking styles of Upton Sinclair and Lincoln Steffens, to more recent treatises against materialism and economic inequality (Altschuler 2003). It has also been a surprisingly prominent and regularized form of presidential speech (Smith and Smith 1994, 133-164). We will encounter the most famous of these jeremiads, Jimmy Carter’s “Crisis of Confidence Speech,” in the next chapter. But as James Morone (2003, 45) observes, every
iteration of the jeremiad has retained the same “rhetorical trajectory,” “lamentations about
decline, warnings of doom, and promises of future glory (if we just get our act together…”

Eisenhower may not have been as harsh as some of his Puritan forbears (or even Carter),
but all these elements are present in this address. Eisenhower worries that we have “fallen
short,” the text is peppered with images of impending doom (i.e. “powder kegs of disaster”) and
he promises salvation if we can get our act together by simply remembering to share our wealth.
Doing so would allow us to “replenish… America’s strength” and to “hasten our progress toward
the goals our fathers established.”

Privately, Eisenhower had been shocked by the level of destitution he had encountered
while abroad. The experience had made him even more convinced that the most fundamental
question facing the world was how the rich countries could help the poor (Ambrose 1984, 553).
Combined with his concerns about both the movement of Cuba towards the Communist bloc and
a perceptible increase in tensions with the Soviets, the trip left Eisenhower more determined than
ever to play an active role in securing the foreign aid amounts he thought necessary (Kaufman
1982, 197). The Pageant of Peace speech reflected this renewed concern. As, too, did his 1960
State of the Union address (Eisenhower 1960a).

Mutual security was one of the first subjects that Eisenhower raised in his rather lengthy
talk. He warned Congress of the dangers of not providing adequate assistance: “These peoples,
desperately hoping to lift themselves to decent levels of living must not, by our neglect, be
forced to seek help from, and finally become virtual satellites of, those who proclaim their
hostility to freedom.” Then, in a substantial section of the speech, he also appealed to the country’s nobler sentiments:

To remain secure and prosperous themselves, wealthy nations must extend the kind of cooperation to the less fortunate members that will inspire hope, confidence and progress. A rich nation can for a time, without noticeable damage to itself, pursue a course of self-indulgence, making its single goal the material ease and comfort of its own citizens- thus repudiating its own spiritual and material stake in a peaceful and prosperous society of nations. But the enmities it will incur, the isolation into which it will descend, and the internal moral and physical softness that will be engendered, will, in the long term, bring it to disaster.

America did not become great through softness and self-indulgence. Her miraculous progress and achievements flow from other qualities far more worthy and substantial

- adherence to principles and methods consonant with our religious philosophy…

For a second time in only a month, we see Eisenhower taking the stance of a Jeremiah with respect to foreign aid. The implication that America has broken its covenant, that the country has, in fact, become marked by “softness and self-indulgence” is clear. As, too, is the warning about the dangerous consequences of this error (“But the enmities… will, in the long term, bring it to disaster”). And, again, he promises future rewards (remaining “secure and prosperous”) if the people are just willing to offer their “cooperation” to other “less fortunate” nations and to recommit to the “religious philosophy” that made them great in the first place.

The next month, Eisenhower undertook another protracted foreign trip. This time, the countries he sought to visit were all in Latin America. Eisenhower had good reasons in wanting to visit this specific part of the world. To some extent, the President merely wanted to avoid offending the region after his recent stops in Europe and the Mideast. But a larger concern was
the increasingly visible appeal Fidel Castro had to America’s Southern neighbors. Eisenhower was convinced that Castro was a Communist and he wanted to position the U.S. opposite the revolutionary as a forceful advocate of democracy and economic reform.

It is worth examining at least one of the speeches that Eisenhower made while visiting South America because it hints at an important aspect of his overall justification for foreign aid, that being that the recipient countries shared the religious beliefs of the American public. Again, they were brothers under God. The brotherhood concept is a consistent and essential part of the frame that Eisenhower placed mutual security in.

Eisenhower spoke to a gathering of the Brazilian national assembly on February 24, 1960 (Eisenhower 1960b). From the outset, he very clearly told the delegates what he thought they had in common: “I am confident that I shall not be thought presumptuous in suggesting that we-our two nations- could speak with a single voice. For our basic ideas have a common inspiration: man, in his sonship under God, is endowed with dignity, entitled to equality in all human and political relations, and destined, through the employment of consecrated intelligence, to shape a world harmonious with basic moral law.” In contrast, however, Eisenhower pointed out the Communist world where “millions now live in an environment permeated with a philosophy which denies the existence of God. That doctrine insists that any means justifies the end sought by the rulers of the state, calls Christianity the ‘sigh of the oppressed,’ and, in short, seeks to return mankind to the age-old fatalistic concept of the omnipotent state and omnipotent fate.” Given this profound linkage, how could the United States not provide the aid Brazil needed?
By now, it has been established beyond a doubt that Eisenhower used a religious rhetorical strategy in an attempt to win support for the mutual security program. The strategy was prominent; he made a religious argument in no less than five nationally broadcast addresses. The strategy was multifaceted. He offered repeated distinctions between the atheist Soviets and the God-fearing American public. He made use of Christian metaphors, of light and dark imagery. He spoke often in terms of religious concepts like brotherhood. He framed the mutual security program as being representative of the meaning of Christmas. He asked for prayers. He even adopted the language of a Jeremiah. Overall, each of these rhetorical devices was bound by a simple logic. The Communists reject God. America believes in God. America should therefore help those who oppose the Communists, both because we share the same beliefs and because our beliefs make it the right thing to do. The next question, though, is did it help? The answer is fairly clearly, no.

We can begin by looking at our set of public opinion measures, not all of which are applicable to this case study. For example, Eisenhower campaigned for mutual security throughout his entire second term. As such, it would not make much sense to look at the change in his approval rating before the start of the campaign and then again at its end. Likewise, not enough data is available to accurately track the progression of public opinion on the mutual security program itself. Pollsters simply did not very often ask voters about their feelings on foreign aid (in fact, a database search yielded only 9 questions between 1957 and 1960).

Eisenhower did, however, make a high number of major speeches where he talked at length about mutual security in religious terms. As such, this case does present a good
opportunity to assess the immediate impact of that type of language on Eisenhower’s personal approval rating. That impact appears to be negligible.

**Table 4.1: Opinion Change Following Eisenhower’s Mutual Security Addresses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Opinion Before</th>
<th>Opinion After</th>
<th>Net Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/21/1957</td>
<td>73 (1/17)</td>
<td>72 (2/7)</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/21/1957</td>
<td>62 (5/17)</td>
<td>64 (6/6)</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/3/1959</td>
<td>67 (12/3)</td>
<td>77 (12/10)</td>
<td>+10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/23/1959</td>
<td>77 (12/10)</td>
<td>66 (1/6)</td>
<td>-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/7/1960</td>
<td>66 (1/6)</td>
<td>64 (2/4)</td>
<td>-2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ragsdale (2009, 184, 228-229)

As Table 4.1 shows, in 3 of the 5 instances there was almost no difference in the President’s rating before and after the given speech. It should be noted that Eisenhower’s December 3, 1959 speech, the speech prior to his good will trip where Eisenhower adopted a jeremiad style as he invited the country to reassess their obligations to the external world, did seem to provide the president with a strong short term boost. Eisenhower recorded a 67% approval rating on the day of the speech, whereas in the next measurement, taken just a week later, Eisenhower clocked in with a ten point improvement in his standing. The acclaim surrounding Ike’s trip, rather than the rhetoric, is the probable cause of this movement.

Regardless, this effect is offset by the corresponding eleven point drop in his approval that surrounded Eisenhower’s Pageant of Peace speech. It is true the gap that between these ratings and that speech is substantially larger. Eisenhower’s approval was only measured about two weeks before the Pageant and then two weeks after. So, the potential effect should be taken with a grain of salt.
In terms of how the public’s thinking evolved on the issue of mutual security itself, given the aforementioned data limitations the best we can attempt is an impressionistic analysis. In general, over the four years under consideration, the public’s views on foreign aid may not have perceptibly changed. A Roper survey in March 1957 asked if the level of foreign economic aid should be “increased, or should it be kept the same as it is now, should it be cut down a little, or should it be cut down drastically?” Only 4% of people felt it should be increased; collectively 59% of people wanted it cut to some extent (Roper Organization 1957). The next month, another study reported similar results when 37% of respondents agreed that the government was spending “too much” on foreign aid while only 2% felt the amount was “not enough.” (National Opinion Research Center 1957). A year later, Gallup asked a nearly identical question. Again, the results were roughly the same. Only 4% of respondents wanted “more” money to be spent on foreign aid; 35% wanted “less” (Gallup Organization 1958). And, finally, in a 1959 survey just 6% of participants thought the amount of money the U.S. devoted to foreign aid should be “increased” as opposed to 39% who wanted to see that amount “decreased” (Gallup Organization 1959). Overlooking the obvious differences in question wording, a fairly visible pattern emerges. Few people ever wanted more spending on foreign aid (the results range from merely 2-6% support) while somewhere around half the country would have liked to have seen less.

A poll on mutual security conducted right after Eisenhower’s May 21, 1957 address confirms this conclusion. Taken immediately after they had heard Ike’s religious argument for foreign aid, 42% of respondents still felt the program should be cut as opposed to the 32% of people who would oppose such a reduction. Interestingly, though, the pollsters used a Hopkins
Televote Machine to track the fluctuations in opinion on a minute by minute basis over the course of the address. This data revealed that the President was most convincing when he spoke about our character and our “sense of kinship with all free men”- the exact section of the speech that was analyzed above (Gallup 1957). The religious rhetoric may have been somewhat persuasive then, but not quite persuasive enough. Although the basis for such an observation is obviously limited, it is still appears very unlikely that Eisenhower’s religious rhetoric on mutual security had any positive public opinion benefit for the President.

The next relationship we must consider when evaluating the effectiveness of Eisenhower’s religious rhetoric involves the media. Did his religious rhetoric lead to better coverage? Given that Eisenhower made five major speeches where he used religious arguments, it is certainly possible to get an accurate read on the impact of this type of language. What is readily apparent from this investigation is that Eisenhower’s religious rhetoric did not serve him well. Mostly what commentary there was came in the form of staff editorials. The 1950s were still a ways away from the rise of nationally recognized individual columnists. Of the four papers, the New York Times was consistently sympathetic to Eisenhower’s foreign aid appeals. Yet, on the other side, the Chicago Tribune was an even fiercer critic. In the end, the Tribune’s sustained and vituperative attacks on foreign aid overwhelmed all other commentary. And Ike’s religious rhetoric seemingly only further antagonized the Tribune’s board.

Eisenhower’s first major address containing instrumental religious rhetoric was his second inaugural. The U.S. foreign aid program was a key part of a larger discussion that occurred at the start of the second Eisenhower term. Congress was in the midst of debating the
Eisenhower Doctrine, first proposed by the President before a joint session on January 5, 1957. Motivated by Soviet activity in the Mideast following the Suez crisis the previous fall, Eisenhower requested a Congressional resolution that would allow him to, one, use the armed forces to oppose any aggression in the area and, two, to allocate at his own discretion around $200 million in aid. There was never any doubt that Congress would support the military aspect of the Doctrine (some members thought the Constitution made such a resolution unnecessary to begin with), but the foreign aid request did spark a vigorous dispute. Hence, the dialogue on foreign aid was wrapped into a larger debate about U.S. policy in the Mideast and thus I had to carefully screen the editorials to limit the included pieces to those commentating on the value of foreign aid in general, as opposed to those concerned with the Eisenhower Doctrine in specific.

Table 4.2 contains the results of this process. 10 editorials on foreign aid were printed in the four papers over the course of the week following the inaugural festivities. 7 of these 10 pieces were negative in tone. The *Chicago Tribune* contributed four critical editorials alone. The *Tribune* blasted both Eisenhower’s foreign aid programs and the religious rhetoric which Ike had used to describe them in the inaugural. In their initial reaction to the address, the paper wrote that “The President’s rhetoric tends to obscure the commonplace realities of our situation and to make a dangerous and costly course of action seem wise, good, and even inspired.” They went on, “In truth, the course of intervention he recommends is the one we have been following for more than a generation and it has brought us nothing more desirable than three wars, the deaths of more than a third of a million young Americans, and a national debt of more than a quarter of a trillion dollars.” Eisenhower, they argued, was “obsessed with what he fancies is
Table 4.2: Editorial Coverage of Eisenhower’s Second Inaugural

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Paper</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/22/57</td>
<td>Chicago Tribune</td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“Inaugural Message”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/22/57</td>
<td>Los Angeles Times</td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“The President’s Inaugural Address”</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/22/57</td>
<td>New York Times</td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“An Inaugural Prayer”</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/22/57</td>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“The Price of Peace”</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/23/57</td>
<td>Chicago Tribune</td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“First Dividends on Ike’s ‘Doctrine’”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/24/57</td>
<td>Chicago Tribune</td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“For Whom the Bell Tolls”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/24/57</td>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>Malvina Lindsay</td>
<td>“U.S. Needs Finesse in Rich Man’s Role”</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/25/57</td>
<td>New York Times</td>
<td>Arthur Krock</td>
<td>“Resemblance to Monroe was Brief”</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/28/57</td>
<td>Chicago Tribune</td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“All in One Year”</td>
<td>1</td>
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</table>

Dates: 1/22 – 1/28

Average Score: 2.40

Positive Articles: 3 (30.0%)

Negative Articles: 7 (70.0%)

Mixed/Neutral Articles: 0 (0.0%)
the duty of the people of this country to make everybody in the world safe, happy, and peaceful at no matter what the cost to the American people and at no matter how heavy a risk of involving our county in war.” (Chicago Tribune 1957a).

In another editorial, the Tribune (1957b) took Eisenhower’s religious arguments head-on. Noting that Eisenhower’s inaugural had drawn from the work of John Donne, the paper admitted that even “allowing for the liberties of translation from a devotional text into a political tract,” they were of the view that Eisenhower’s speech was “without perceptible improvement of the original.” The Tribune essentially felt that Eisenhower was misunderstanding Christian ethics. “It can be said that this (foreign aid) is the role of a Christian,” the board wrote, “yet a Christian can do good unto others only as long as he can sustain himself. And, furthermore, there is a limit to governmental folly and internationalist infatuation, even when it is wrapped in a quasi-religious appeal.” Eisenhower’s “salvationist mission” would only be an “endless drain upon our energies, our wealth, and our resources,” the paper argued.

Surely, the New York Times (1957) and the Washington Post (1957) were warm to the President’s inaugural message. The Times wrote that Eisenhower had captured “the basic issues of the things by which we live.” Commenting on the President’s prayer, the Times said, “We join in his prayer, in his aspiration, and in his dedication to pursue that which is right, without self-righteousness.” “In humility and reverence,” the paper wrote, “we can say God grant that his prayer be answered.” However, these two papers did not evince nearly the same intensity of feeling as the Tribune’s board did. Nor were they unanimous in their praise. Malvina Lindsay (1957) of the Post argued that Eisenhower had yet to realize that the Soviets’ aid policies were
superior. Arthur Krock (1957) of the Times implied that no one was taking Eisenhower’s vision of international brotherhood seriously to begin with.

Eisenhower’s second major instance of religious rhetoric came several months later on May 21. The reaction to this speech was better, but still mixed. As seen in Table 4.3, out of 11 total editorials, 5 were negative and 5 were positive. Again, the same division by paper was apparent as the Tribune continued its assault on Eisenhower’s foreign aid budget. In one piece, the paper turned Eisenhower’s past words against him. In some earlier comments made during the 1952 presidential campaign, Eisenhower had suggested that the country’s foreign aid packages were counterproductive. By shilling so enthusiastically for them now, the Tribune said Eisenhower was little more than a “huckster and lobbyist” (Chicago Tribune 1957c). In another piece, the Tribune criticized Eisenhower for providing aid to countries like Yugoslavia—countries that took American dollars and then later cozied up to the enemy Soviets (Chicago Tribune 1957d). In a third editorial, the paper alleged that communism was only a rationalization for foreign aid, merely “a convenient excuse for handouts, and if it did not exist” then “the internationalists would invent another one” (Chicago Tribune 1957e).

This time, the Tribune was joined in their opposition by the Los Angeles Times (1957). In an editorial dripping with contempt, the West coast paper wrote that Eisenhower’s arguments for mutual security were built on an “unsupported faith achieved mystically through an inward grace.” Ike and the other “philosophers of giveaway,” as the paper branded them, believed that American money could remake the world in America’s own image. The board disagreed with this premise, arguing instead that American aid had heretofore been ineffective, pointing out that
Table 4.3: Editorial Coverage of Eisenhower’s Mutual Security Address on May 21, 1957

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Paper</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>5/22/57</td>
<td>Chicago Tribune</td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“What Does Foreign Aid Do for Us?”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/22/57</td>
<td>Los Angeles Times</td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“The President Says He Needs It All”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/22/57</td>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“The Battle Joined”</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/23/57</td>
<td>Chicago Tribune</td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“Lobbyist in the White House”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/24/57</td>
<td>New York Times</td>
<td>Arthur Krock</td>
<td>“Timing of the President’s Counter-Attack”</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/26/57</td>
<td>Chicago Tribune</td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“Mr. Eisenhower’s Friend Tito”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/26/57</td>
<td>Chicago Tribune</td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“The 80 Year Old ‘Emergency’”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/26/57</td>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“Mr. Nixon’s Blessing”</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/28/57</td>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“Tools of Leadership”</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dates: 5/22 – 5/28

Average Score 3.00

Positive Articles 5 (45.5%)

Negative Articles 5 (45.5%)

Mixed/Neutral Articles 1 (9.1%)
the French were “taking the troops we helped to pay for and the equipment we provided to fight a colonial war in Africa.” As such, the paper concluded, “An economizing Congress should study this Presidential message very carefully, and- with no disparagement of Mr. Eisenhower’s beliefs in the matter- very skeptically.”

What positive reaction there was this week was not so much in response to Eisenhower’s programs nor to his religious rhetoric. Rather, many were simply impressed that Eisenhower was regaining the upper-hand in his tug-of-war with Congress. A common perception at the time was that Eisenhower’s influence was rapidly waning and, further, that the President was curiously disengaged from his agenda. His strong speech on May 21 convinced many otherwise. For example, Stewart Alsop (1957) complimented Eisenhower on a speech that “for the first time really struck home to the listeners.” He presumed that “the President’s belated counterattack will save him the guts of his defense and foreign aid programs.” But, significantly, Alsop never said whether he was now convinced of the necessity of foreign aid or not.

Eisenhower’s three other major addresses featuring religious rhetoric all occurred over the course of the month between the end of 1959 and the start of 1960. No speech by itself produced much commentary on foreign aid and, given that they all were delivered in such a short time span, it makes sense to group the results together, as I do in Table 4.4. Once more, the media was not favorable to Eisenhower. 6 out of 13 articles were negative in tone and the average piece was scored a 2.69, well below the 3 that would indicate neutrality. The Chicago Tribune (1959) yet again led the counterattack. Capitalizing on Eisenhower’s Christmas imagery, the paper compared the President to Santa Claus, but they rued “the difference is that
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Paper</th>
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<th>Title</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<tr>
<td>12/4/59</td>
<td><em>Washington Post</em></td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“Image of America”</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>12/9/59</td>
<td><em>Chicago Tribune</em></td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“Santa’s Competitor”</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>12/10/59</td>
<td><em>New York Times</em></td>
<td>James Reston</td>
<td>“Foreign-Aid Problems”</td>
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<tr>
<td>12/24/59</td>
<td><em>Washington Post</em></td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“Mr. Eisenhower’s Odyssey”</td>
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<td>12/27/59</td>
<td><em>Chicago Tribune</em></td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“Executive Secrets”</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>12/28/59</td>
<td><em>Chicago Tribune</em></td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“Hang Up Your Stockings”</td>
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<td>1/8/60</td>
<td><em>Chicago Tribune</em></td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“State of the Union”</td>
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<tr>
<td>1/8/60</td>
<td><em>Los Angeles Times</em></td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“On the State of the Presidency”</td>
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<td>1/8/60</td>
<td><em>New York Times</em></td>
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<td>“State of the Union”</td>
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<td>1/10/60</td>
<td><em>Washington Post</em></td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“The Union Adrift”</td>
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<td>1/10/60</td>
<td><em>Chicago Tribune</em></td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“Moral Imperatives”</td>
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<td><em>New York Times</em></td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“The State of the Universe”</td>
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*Average Score*: 2.69

- **Positive Articles**: 4 (30.8%)
- **Negative Articles**: 6 (46.2%)
- **Mixed/Neutral Articles**: 3 (23.1%)
when Santa brings gifts, he holds the bag. When Mr. Eisenhower visits the world’s hopefuls, the taxpayers hold the bag.” In a piece responding to Eisenhower’s State of the Union religious rhetoric, in particular, the *Tribune* (1960) said that listening to the speech was “something like being hit over the head with a two-by-four to impress the wisdom of being good.” They claimed that Eisenhower was “feeding the nation a diet of homily grits.” However, noting that some of the strongest advocates for foreign aid also had personal financial interests at stake in recipient countries, the board chastised those who would claim that mutual security was important solely as a “moral imperative.” In that case, “Apparently Providence rewards those hearts bleed for the underprivileged,” the paper noted.

Even the *Washington Post* (1959), typically supportive of foreign assistance, was no longer fully on board at this point. The *Post* praised Eisenhower’s religious rhetoric on December 3. “Reiteration of spiritual values in a Nation that is often advertised by its material culture can serve an important purpose,” the board acknowledged. Yet, they lamented that “too often the performance belies the fine phrases.”

Hence, overall, Eisenhower’s religious rhetoric did not generate positive media coverage for his mutual security budgets. Cumulatively, over the course of five speeches there were more negative op-eds published than positive ones. The *Chicago Tribune* was an incessant critic and, indeed, found even more to criticize in Eisenhower’s linguistic choices. Finally, in what will become a common pattern, even outlets who liked the religious rhetoric were capable of criticizing the policies it was linked to.

Eisenhower did not experience any more success in his dealings with Congress. In 1957,
Eisenhower’s mutual security requests had to overcome obstacles in both the authorization and the appropriations stages of the political process. The Mutual Security Act of 1957, as originally proposed, included both the President’s request for funding (a total of $3.87 billion dollars) as well as the aforementioned structural changes that Eisenhower wished to see made (the creation of a Development Loan Fund, the permanent authorization of technical assistance, etc.). The final bill that was agreed to in conference was a mixed bag for the Administration. On the one hand, Congress authorized $3.38 billion in foreign aid, and not the $3.87 billion that had been requested. Although disappointed in these cuts, Eisenhower still wanted the bill to pass because Congress had agreed to many of the procedural revisions he wanted, including authorizing the Loan Fund, which was Eisenhower’s first priority. As Kaufman (1982, 108) notes, “In sum, the president believed that, provided no further cuts were made, the mutual security bill as approved by Congress would allow the administration to carry out most of its foreign aid program for 1958.”

It turned out that Eisenhower’s fortunes drastically deteriorated as the bill moved on to Appropriations. By a margin of 129-254, on August 15 the President badly lost a House vote on a motion to recommit sponsored by Walter Judd (R-MN) which would have returned the bill with instructions to restore $715 million in funding. Plus, ultimately at the end of the month Congress cut a further $598,323,000 from the amount they had just authorized for the mutual security program. Ike was livid, fuming “Some people are still stupid enough to believe in the concept of ‘Fortress America.’” (Kaufman 1982, 109-110).
1959 also saw another battle between the Administration and Congress over foreign aid. This year, Eisenhower would request $3.93 billion in total authorizations. The discussion over this request would be marked by an attempt to increase the emphasis on economic, as opposed to military, aid. In addition to being forced to make some compromises on the design of the program, Eisenhower was pressured into accepting a final appropriation that was $704 million under his request. This was a better result than the $1.1 billion cut that he had to swallow in 1957, but still a somewhat hollow victory. The package was, however, well supported in Congress. Despite a nearly two-to-one Democrat to Republican majority, Eisenhower carried the vote on passage of the Mutual Security Act of 1959 easily, 271-142 in the House and 56-26 in the Senate.

In 1958 and 1960 Congress did debate appropriations for mutual security, though the fights in these two years were somewhat less significant because of previous authorizations. In 1958, $644 million had already been authorized by previous laws. The main points of contention were both the amount to be authorized and appropriated as well as whether the President would be permitted to funnel aid to Communist nations other than the Soviet Union. The latter issue receded in importance when Eisenhower agreed to seek such authority in a separate piece of legislation. Overall, Eisenhower had better luck with the 1958 bill as opposed to the previous year’s edition, but he was still sorely disappointed by the final outcome. Though the cuts were not as deep, Congress continued to provide less money than the President had requested. The final $3.3 billion appropriation was $600 million below Eisenhower’s initial recommendation.
In 1960, $2.72 billion had already been authorized for fiscal 1961, an amount equal to over half the amount requested. Ultimately, Congress would agree to appropriate $3.78 billion in total, about $469 million less than the revised White House request. Although the cuts in fiscal 1961 were, percentage-wise, the smallest of his presidency (9 percent), Eisenhower was nonetheless discouraged by the outcome. Perhaps in a sign of defeat, Eisenhower did not even issue a signing statement expressing his displeasure with these cuts, something that heretofore had been his custom.

In sum, Eisenhower’s religious rhetoric on mutual security did not bear much fruit in terms of his relationship with Congress. Congress, instead, dictated the outcomes, cutting funds from Eisenhower’s foreign aid requests by no less than 9% every single year. On the floor, it is hard not say that the support Ike received in 1959 is cancelled out by the support he did not receive in 1957.

In conclusion, Stephen Ambrose’s (1984, 377) evaluation of the history of mutual security truly said it best: “Over the next four years, Eisenhower would try every form of persuasion at his command to demonstrate to his countrymen the importance of the Third World to the United States. It was one of the most frustrating experiences of his life. He could not convince the people; he could not convince the Republican Party; he could not even convince his own Secretary of the Treasury.” Despite his relentless and varied religious rhetoric, Eisenhower typically did not experience any improvement in his personal standing, the public remained steadfast in its opposition, the media did not respond positively to his five major addresses and Congress cut his requests every single year. Frustrating, indeed.
Chapter 5


Religion was a surprisingly tricky issue for President James Earl Carter. In short, Carter had to deal with what his chief political advisor Hamilton Jordan once memorably called the “weirdo factor” (Morris 1996, 5). Carter was a Southern Baptist, born again and an evangelical (though, significantly, not a fundamentalist). These were new things to the presidential politics of the 1970s.

Evangelical Protestantism had been a significant influence in American politics up until the 1920s. In fact, evangelicals played a key role in a number of important social movements, including the fight for the abolition of slavery. But they mainly retreated from the political arena following major defeats on Prohibition and the teaching of evolution (Wilcox and Larson 2006, 35-41).

Indeed, the battle over evolution looms as a turning point of sorts. Many Christians passionately defended the Biblical account of creation found in Genesis which describes how God creates the Earth in six days, making the first man, Adam, out of the dust, and the first woman, Eve, out of one of Adam’s ribs. Evolution obviously is a major contradiction and many evangelicals were further troubled by the social implications of Darwin’s survival of the fittest theories. As a result, the evangelical community reacted to the spread of these ideas by

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5 Although sharing certain beliefs in common with many other evangelicals, fundamentalists are more likely to reject modern culture, to believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible and to value separation from other faiths (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2011, 229).
introducing anti-evolution bills in twenty different state legislatures in the 1920s, though most were not adopted.

The most famous moment in this crusade was the Scopes “monkey” trial, held in Dayton, Tennessee in 1925. John Scopes, a high school science teacher, had been convinced to stand trial in a case intended to test the constitutionality of Tennessee’s anti-evolution statute. Dayton’s civic boosters eagerly sought the opportunity to play host, feeling that such a trial could generate favorable publicity for their shrinking township. The high point was the showdown between Clarence Darrow, the preeminent attorney of the time and Scopes’ defense, and William Jennings Bryan, the Great Commoner and former Democratic presidential candidate who had been called to the stand as a Bible expert. Darrow sought to undermine the position of Biblical literalism with his questioning. In this sense, he succeeded as Bryan was unable to explain various inconsistencies and at one point even admitted that the days in the creation story may actually have represented ages.

At the same time, recent research has conclusively proved that it would be a mistake to cast the trial as an unmitigated disaster for Bryan or the fundamentalist cause in general (Larson 1997). Bryan was buoyed by his performance and was preparing to undertake a great public speaking tour were it not for his death a few days after the verdict. Moreover, book publishers responded to the circus in Dayton by voluntarily removing references to evolution from their biology texts. It was not until the launch of Sputnik, bringing with it a new U.S. emphasis on scientific education, that the theory reappeared in the country’s classrooms.

Still, many religious Americans revolted against the politicization of their faith and were
burned by the derision that events like the Scopes trial had generated. When combined with the failure of Prohibition, many simply decided they were better off sitting on the sidelines (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2011, 202-204). In the middle of the century, evangelicals thus mostly withdrew from politics in what historians have termed the “great reversal.” They would only begin to remerge in the 1970s when certain local movements— a fight against textbooks in Kanawha County, WV, a battle against a gay rights ordinance in Dade County, FL— had demonstrated their unrealized political potential.

Carter therefore emerged as a major political player in conjunction with the beginnings of this wider evangelical movement. Although he had publicly professed his faith by the age of eleven and had been ordained as a deacon in 1958, Carter had not been particularly devout during his early life. Carter called his time in the Navy a “dormant phase” in his religious life (Carter 2002, 23). Partly he had struggled to reconcile religious teachings with the technical training he had received as an engineer (Morris 2009, 324). However, a third place finish in a 1966 Georgia gubernatorial primary plunged Carter into a deep depression and prompted him to reassess his values. Carter struggled to understand how God could let Lester Maddox, an avowed segregationist best known for brandishing an ax handle in front of his restaurant, defeat him (Carter 2002, 202). Carter turned to his Christian faith for solace but found little at first. He was particularly unsettled by a sermon he had heard that asked “If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” Carter’s answer troubled him. “Defending myself against the charge of being a Christian wouldn’t be hard,” Carter remembered. “I could imagine explaining with great conviction that, except during the
Thanksgiving and Christmas seasons, I had rarely associated with the really poor citizens of our community… As far as my church membership was concerned, there were obvious social and financial advantages… All in all, there was little evidence that I was anything other than a lukewarm follower of Christ” (208-209).

As a result of these revelations Carter was “born again.” He took a new interest in the Bible, embarked on two domestic missions, attended multiple religious conferences and even organized the showing of a Billy Graham film in Americus, GA (Morris 2009, 325; Smith 2006, 294-295).

As a candidate, Carter had initially been reluctant to discuss the evolution of his religious beliefs. That changed following an interview his sister, Ruth Carter Stapleton, gave to the Washington Post in March of 1976. Stapleton was herself somewhat of a curious figure. She ran an “inner healing” ministry that rather impractically tried to combine the insights of both psychology (based on her thirty hours of graduate study) and spirituality in attempt to heal an individual’s emotional wounds. In addition to discussing her own practice, Stapleton recounted to the Post in some detail the events of her brother’s born again experience (MacPherson 1976). Stapleton recalled walking through the woods with Carter after his defeat in 1966. Carter asked his sister what made her faith different from his. Stapleton told the interviewer:

I said, ‘Jimmy, through my hurt and pain I finally got so bad off I had to forget everything I was. What it amounts to in religious terms is total commitment. I belong to Jesus, everything I am.’ He said, ‘Ruth, that’s what I want.’ So we went through everything he would be willing to give up. Money was no problem, nor friends, nor family. Then, I asked, ‘What about all political ambitions?’ He said, ‘Ruth! You know I want to be governor. I would use it for the people!’ I said, ‘No, Jimmy.’
But he really meant it and became connected with part-time religious work. So he went to Pennsylvania and New York (on a Baptist missionary tour for less than a year). Jimmy’s a Baptist and to commit your life, Baptists think you have to go off and be a missionary somewhere.

The *Post* dispatched another reporter to confirm this story with the candidate. Carter admitted that Ruth’s account was “basically accurate.” And since the cat was now out of the bag, he proceeded to expand on Ruth’s comments at a fundraiser later that same evening. Carter spoke to his donors of a “deeply profound religious experience.” He said, “I recognized for the first time that I lacked something very precious- a complete commitment to Christ, a presence of the Holy Spirit in my life in a more profound and personal way. And since then I’ve had an inner peace and inner conviction and assurance that transformed my life for the better” (Witcover 1976). In a subsequent speech, Ruth said that Jimmy had broken down and cried during his reaffirmation of faith (Carter 1984, 66).

Presidents, and presidential candidates, simply did not talk nor act this way. Many Americans had little idea what any of this meant. As one network anchor felt compelled to say in a broadcast, “Incidentally, we’ve checked this out. Being ‘born again’ is not a bizarre experience of the voice of God from the mountaintop. It’s a fairly common experience known to millions of Americans- especially if you’re Baptist.” (Balmer 2008, 80). Although the anchor was right, Carter nonetheless had to be careful to manage the outside world’s perceptions. Not only did he risk appearing strange to the American public, but his certain faith gave him an air of self-righteousness that his opponents often exploited at the first hint of hypocrisy (Hargrove
Sometimes, Carter fell short in pursuit of this goal. Perhaps the most infamous example was his late September 1976 interview with *Playboy* magazine. Although many esteemed Americans had been interviewed in the magazine’s pages, it is hard to understand why, exactly, Carter consented to the piece. It was a moment like when Bill Clinton discussed the pressing boxers vs. briefs issue with MTV news.\(^7\) In trying to make the point that he did not believe himself “better” than anyone else because of his religiosity, Carter stumbled. He said:

> I try not to commit a deliberate sin. I recognize that I’m going to do it anyhow, because I’m human and I’m tempted. And Christ set almost impossible standards for us. Christ said, ‘I tell you that anyone who looks on a woman with lust in his heart has already committed adultery.’

> I’ve looked on a lot of women with lust. I’ve committed adultery in my heart many times. This is something that God recognizes that I will do- and I have done it- and God forgives me for it. But that doesn’t mean that I condemn someone who not only looks on a woman with lust but who leaves his wife and shacks up with somebody out of wedlock.

> Christ says, Don’t consider yourself better than someone else because one guy screws a whole bunch of women while the other guy is loyal to his wife. The guy who is loyal to his wife ought not to be condescending or proud because of the relative degrees of sinfulness (Ribuffo 1989, 145-146)

This was the quintessential example of how his devout faith could land Carter in hot water. His comments were either laughable or downright upsetting to nearly everyone. The *Playboy* interview finally convinced many secular voters that Carter’s faith truly was a serious concern and his comfortable lead over Ford disappeared in the aftermath of its publication. Yet

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\(^7\) In case you were wondering, Clinton’s answer was “usually briefs.”
evangelicals were not pleased, either. As the Rev. Bailey Smith pointed out, “shacks up” and
“screws” were not exactly “good Baptist” words (146).

More often than not, though, when it came to religion caution prevailed for Carter. According to Smith’s (2006, 296) exhaustive research, as president, Carter made fewer explicit references to the Bible or to his own faith than most other presidents, including Lincoln, Roosevelt, Eisenhower and Reagan. And he would typically side-step opportunities to inject religion into the discussion of public policy issues. When a Polish journalist asked him in December of 1977 how his evangelical principles helped him solve problems, he refused to give an example. When in March of 1979 he was asked on what scriptural basis he supported the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), Carter responded that although he sought guidance from the Bible, his position was in no way based on its wisdom (298). Carter continued to be visible in his religious practices—he taught Sunday school class fourteen times as president— but there would be no repeat of his 1976 public self-examination (Bourne 1997, 377).

It was not just the “weirdo factor” that explained this reticence. One reason Carter avoiding talking about religion was because of his religion. Baptists are, in general, some of the foremost defenders of the doctrine of separation of church and state. Their commitment to this ideal is in many respects a legacy of the denomination’s history. In colonial New England and Virginia, Baptists were disadvantaged in conflicts with the established churches. This experience made many early Baptists leading advocates for religious liberty (Brackney 2006, 39-42).

Carter’s political record demonstrated his own commitment to this principle. As a state
senator, Carter was practically alone in his opposition to a bill that stated all Georgians were free to worship God as they saw fit. Carter felt that the bill’s presumption of God’s existence violated the rights of atheists (Morris 2009, 325). As Governor of Georgia, Carter put an end to the religious services that had been held every morning in the state house. He also opposed the state’s “blue laws” that banned the sale of alcohol on Sundays (Glad 1980, 333). As President, he declared his personal opposition to abortion, and did refuse to support the use of federal funds to pay for it, but at the same time he promised to uphold, and did not seek to overturn, Roe v Wade. He consistently opposed school prayer and fought against tuition tax credits for parochial schools. He resisted regular meetings with religious groups and paid little attention to their concerns in order to avoid any appearances of favoritism (Smith 2006, 307-308). He also reneged on a promise to hire evangelicals for his White House staff. As a consequence, Carter had strained relations with most major religious leaders who would then abandon him in droves for the more responsive Ronald Reagan in 1980 (Bourne 1997, 466-468).

If you asked him, Carter would go so far as to deny his very role as a spiritual leader. At a February 18, 1978 town hall in Nashua, NH, a high school student named Bruce Prevost asked the President if he would help America repent for the country’s past immorality. Carter fumbled with his answer a bit, but he did demonstrate a precise understanding of the relationship between his faith and that of the country he led. Carter responded, “Well, my own religious faith is one that’s much more personal… I don’t consider myself to be the spiritual leader of this country. I’m the political leader. I have a right, I think, and a duty to be frank with the American people about my own belief. And I’m not a priest nor a bishop nor someone who, you know, fills a
religious pulpit and is authorized nor asked to repent for the whole country” (Carter 1978b).

All of this- Carter’s political complications with respect to religion, his reluctance to employ religious rhetoric, his reflexive commitment to the separation of church and state- makes the case of his energy policy campaign incredibly interesting.

Carter began his term as president personally committed to resolving the country’s energy problems. The price of foreign oil had doubled since 1973’s Yom Kippur War, from $6 to $12 a barrel, and at the same time the U.S. had come to depend on outside sources for around 50% of its total supply (Kaufman 1993, 32). Fuel shortages ravaged the country during the winter of 1976 as schools and factories nationwide were shuttered due to the inadequate availability of natural gas. Carter knew the solution to the shortages rested in increasing the cost of energy so as to discourage waste while likewise incentivizing the development of new sources. But these higher costs could not be so extreme as to invite a recession and nor could the oil companies be seen as unduly profiting from the hardships of the American people. That was the challenge.

Carter released his first energy plan in April of 1977. The main elements of the President’s proposal were a variety of new taxes- on domestic oil production, on gas consumption over stated targets, on low fuel-efficiency cars and trucks, etc. Part of the tax revenue would be rebated to the public in the form of energy assistance for low-income citizens. The plan tilted more towards increasing conservation than it did towards encouraging production.

The legislation was enormously complicated, consisting of 113 separate provisions, and
had been drafted by Carter’s energy advisor, James Schlesinger, in almost total secrecy. When printed, the bill was five phonebooks thick (Morris 1996, 254). Even the administration could not quite get a grasp on what they were trying to accomplish; they had to set up twenty four separate legislative teams, each responsible for lobbying for a different aspect of the plan (Katz 1984, 100). The House and Senate were understandably flummoxed by Carter’s proposal and found themselves unable to resolve fundamental differences over the legislation in 1977, postponing action until the next session. A dispute over the question of natural gas deregulation continued to hold the program up throughout almost all of 1978.

After eighteen months, Carter’s package finally did pass in October 1978 but the final law was hardly as the President had originally envisioned it. The bill now emphasized deregulation and tax credits, whereas Carter’s initial proposal was centered on spurring conservation via taxation. Some of his taxes, such as the crude oil equalization tax and the standby gas tax, were abandoned all together. As Katz (1984, 111) notes, “The bill’s success could only be measured in terms of its overall significance- ideologically and emotionally- not as a presidential victory or defeat.”

Perhaps then it is not a surprise that the legislation was mostly unsuccessful in achieving its aims. The bill’s flaws comprise some of the explanation, but the Iranian revolution was to blame as well. Domestic unrest brought Iran’s oil production practically to a halt, severely impacting the world’s supply. The U.S. only imported 5% of its oil from Iran so the seriousness of the situation was not immediately recognized (133). The OPEC countries capitalized on the turmoil, however, by raising the price of their oil by as much as 17% (Kaufman 1993, 136). The
resulting oil shortage affected the entire country.

It is hard for someone who did not live through it to imagine, but by mid-May of 1979 motorists regularly waited an hour or more to reach the pumps. Some stations reported lines of up to a mile long. Many were forced to close on Sunday or to shorten their hours in order to conserve enough gas until their next delivery. The *Washington Post* would print daily consumer guides listing the hours that certain pumps would be open and the maximum purchases each station would allow (see, for instance, McCombs and Frankel 1979).

The stations, moreover, were volatile locations, with fist fights and gun battles occasionally breaking out as many people reached the end of their patience. One man was burned alive in an attempt to siphon gas with an electric pump. Another attacked a pregnant woman who was mistakenly accused of cutting the line (Mattson 2009, 65). A gas station attendant had his ankle snapped by an angry customer. Another was attacked with a machete (110).

It was in this context that President Carter unveiled what he termed “phase two” of his energy policy. 50% of America’s oil still originated from domestic sources. But 70% of the oil from these reservoirs was subject to the Energy Policy and Conservation Act of 1975 (EPCA), which mandated price ceilings ranging from about $5.50 to $12.65 a barrel as compared to a world price of $15.20 (Kaufman 1993, 137). Hence, a potentially easy solution to suppress consumption would be to remove the price controls and allow gas prices to rise naturally. It seemed a better option, too, than the practical and political challenges inherent in rationing. In an April 5, 1979 Oval Office address, Carter announced that he was phasing out all controls on
oil by October 1981. Given that the oil companies stood to financially benefit from his decision, Carter called for a windfall profits tax, the proceeds from which would be used to fund the development of alternative energy sources, provide monetary assistance to families struggling with the price increases and to build more fuel efficient mass transportation. It would have been a tough sell under any set of conditions, but it was especially so given the country’s struggles with 14% annual inflation. The President’s proposal promised that energy prices would rise even higher.

Such was the situation in the summer of 1979. At this point it is useful to examine the kinds of arguments Carter had made to date in favor of his energy policy. His April 5, 1979 speech was the fourth major speech he had given to the nation on energy. The first was a talk from the White House library on February 2, 1977 (Carter 1977b). On this night, Carter appeared relaxed and spoke in a collected tone. He was seated comfortably in an upholstered chair, next to a crackling fire, wearing a beige cardigan. It was a very homespun presentation, no doubt inspired by Franklin Roosevelt’s legendary radio addresses. Carter would review his whole agenda, but he opened by discussing energy. He did not use any religious or moral rhetoric. Indeed, although he stressed the gravity and permanent nature of the shortages, he did not even give the sense that much at all would be asked of the American public. Carter said that what the country needed was merely to “cooperate and make modest sacrifices” and to “learn to live thriftily.” He promised that “we need not sacrifice the quality of our lives.” Some of his suggestions were equally minor and harmless, like asking the country to keep their thermostats set at 65 during the day and 55 at night.
In his library chat, Carter had promised to deliver his full energy plan to Congress by April 20. He prepared the legislature for its arrival with another national address on April 18 (Carter 1977c). Here, Carter did explicitly, and regrettably, call the energy crisis “the moral equivalent of war” (known by its critics as the feline acronym “MEOW”). But that was as far as he went. The text did not contain any other moral or religious sentiments. Instead, Carter mainly resorted to scare tactics. He warned that the alternative to his plan was “a national catastrophe.” He argued that a failure to act would lead to an “economic, social and political crisis that will threaten our free institutions.” He told the country that “our factories will not be able to keep our people on the job,” we would feel “mounting pressure to plunder the environment,” and “inflation will soar; production will go down; people will lose their jobs.”

Carter chose to give a third speech on energy that November (Carter 1977d). In addition to a plainspoken explanation of a very complex set of ideas, Carter focused on the interconnections between the economy and national security in this address. He referred to an unemployed Detroit steelworker as he made the case that that man’s unfortunate situation was crucially linked to our flawed energy policies. He quoted his own Secretary of Defense as he tried to convince the public that without a long-term strategy the country would be at the mercy of the oil exporting countries.

Carter gave his fourth energy speech, as aforementioned, on April 5, 1979 (Carter 1979a). Other than some cheap demonization of the oil companies, there was nothing very distinctive or unique about this address when compared to the earlier three. It should not be shocking, then, that the American public had gradually begun to tune their president out.
80 million Americans had watched Carter’s April 18, 1977 energy speech. His April 5, 1979 address attracted an audience of only 30 million (Mattson 2009, 21). His approval rating that month dropped to 40% (Ragsdale 2009, 236).

Carter was in crisis. He had been fighting, mostly unsuccessfully, for energy reform for almost three years. The nation was fed up, and their anger was visible every time a camera crew filmed a gas line. His audiences were shrinking, and his poll numbers were going down with them. In short, he was desperate.

But that April also marked the beginnings of a gradual strategic change in the president’s approach towards selling his energy programs. It was a change that would culminate in Carter undertaking one of the most strenuous religious rhetorical campaigns in modern times. On April 9, Carter’s wunderkind pollster Pat Caddell came to the White House for a breakfast with the First Lady. Caddell briefed Rosalynn on his recent research which showed an alarming increase in the number of what he called “long-term pessimists,” those individuals who were losing faith in their country, their government and themselves. Rosalynn was so moved by Caddell’s presentation that she brought it up to her husband later that night. Carter was interested, and he requested that Caddell give him the information in a memo when he returned from his upcoming vacation (Mattson 2009, 23-25).

Caddell’s final product was extraordinary, more a graduate thesis than a memo. Weighing in at seventy five pages, “Of Crisis and Opportunity” (the memo’s title), was mostly downbeat and disheartening. Staffers joked that it should have been renamed “Apocalypse Now,” after the forthcoming film (46). As he tried to dissect the societal undercurrents of the
70s, Caddell warned Carter that ultimately a burgeoning “spiritual crisis” could lead “society to turn inward” (35). But all was not lost. The “opportunity” part of the title referred to the fact that the American people were receptive to the possibility of rebirth. Caddell included a discussion of “covenant language” and quotes from the Rev. Jesse Jackson about “spiritual regeneration.” He urged the president to deliver a jeremiad (46-47).

There should be little doubt, however, that what Caddell was offering was fundamentally advice about political strategy. Caddell was still trying to help Carter figure out how to get his energy program through Congress. As Carter recalls it in his memoirs, “His (Caddell’s) recent data had persuaded him that the American people had become completely inured to warnings about future energy shortages, convinced that both the government and the oil companies were either incompetent or dishonest- or both. In order for the people to support any energy proposals, the memorandum stated, their attention must somehow be focused on the facts, and the solutions must be cast in the form of a patriotic struggle to overcome a genuine threat to our country. Another recitation of my earlier themes would either put them to sleep or arouse in them a greater level of alienation and rejection” (Carter 1982, 114-115).

Carter did not take this advice at first, at least not immediately. A fifth energy speech was planned for the evening of Thursday, July 5, 1979. On July 3, the President flew to Camp David and waited for a draft to arrive. The speech he received was so awful, so uninspired, that Carter fell asleep reading it. The next morning, Carter resolutely phoned his staff in D.C. and told them to cancel it. His aides were apoplectic. The networks had already reserved the time and Carter was cancelling a national address from outside the Capitol with no public explanation.
This action gave the appearance of instability. But when the President refused to change his mind, Carter’s closest advisors grudgingly packed up and retreated to join him in Maryland on the 5th. Before leaving, Carter’s press secretary, Jody Powell, told reporters that the president was there “assessing major domestic policy issues” that “include but go beyond the question of energy.” As Mattson (2009, 132) observes, “Not even Powell knew what that meant.”

Over the next ten days, Carter remained secluded. The Administration had little communication with the press as different individuals came and went. Labor leaders, college presidents, governors, businessmen, ministers. Each gave the President their own opinion on what was wrong with America. Carter even left Camp David by helicopter on two occasions in order to make surprise visits to hardscrabble families in Pennsylvania and West Virginia so that he could get the perspective of the public first hand.

Over the course of the week and a half, Carter had at last been convinced that Caddell was right, that he not only should, but that he had to deliver a jeremiad. But not all of his team agreed. Vice President Walter Mondale, in particular, was incensed. To seem to blame the American people, Mondale argued with palpable disgust, for the Administration’s lack of a coherent energy policy was a recipe for disaster. Others wondered what in the world things like Carter’s inability to find movies suitable for his daughter Amy, or the contents of People magazine, had to do with energy. Both were brought up at Camp David, though.

Carter boarded a helicopter headed back towards the White House at 6 PM on Saturday, July 14. He had rescheduled his national address for 10 PM Sunday. The overt religious symbolism of Carter’s time in the mountains was not lost on the media. Multiple outlets asked
the President whether he viewed himself as a modern-day Moses (in the Old Testament, Moses ascends Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments from God). He did not, Carter answered (i.e. Broder 1979a; Smith 1979). In a rather stunning coincidence, however, CBS’s schedule for that Sunday consisted of the movie Moses the Lawgiver (Mattson 2009, 156).

Much of the key language in the address had been decided upon in a July 10 meeting with some of the nation’s foremost religious leaders. Marc Tanenbaum, director of Interreligious Affairs for the American Jewish Committee, explicitly told Carter that he did see him as a Moses going off into the wilderness to find guidance. All of the clerics counseled the president to face the problems of materialism and selfishness head on (141-145).

Carter opened by telling the country that the question he was trying to answer was “Why have we not been able to get together as a nation to resolve our serious energy problem?” (Carter 1979b). And the answer, the President suggested, was because “the true problems of our Nation are much deeper than gasoline lines or energy shortages, deeper even than inflation or recession.” Hands clasped before him, Carter proceeded to first outline his own manifold shortcomings, based on what he heard while at Camp David. It was a confession of sins of sorts. He said he had been told he was not seen by the people enough, that he was managing instead of leading, that his cabinet was disloyal. But, as he said, “This kind of summarized a lot of other statements: ‘Mr. President, we are confronted with a moral and a spiritual crisis.’”

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8 As it is, Carter may have somewhat identified with Moses after all. In a 1978 speech at a dinner in Atlanta (Carter 1978a), the President recalled a Biblical story where Moses leads the Israelites in battle. God had told Moses that as long as he held his arm up, the Israelites would win. After some time, his arm got tired and began to sag. Moses needed his brothers to help prop him up. Carter said that he did not mean to “equate himself with Moses” but at the same time he did say that if his “arm gets heavy and it starts to sag” he would be depending on them to help him “prop it up.”
This crisis, which he termed a “crisis of confidence,” had led to a “growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives.” Now, Carter said:

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we’ve discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We’ve learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.

The causes of our dismay, according to the President, were the traumatic events of the past decade- the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King, Jr., Watergate, inflation and Vietnam. There was a solution, though. Carter told the country that the first step was that “we must face the truth, and then we can change our course.” The country was at a turning point, he said:

There are two paths to choose. One is a path I’ve warned about tonight, the path that leads to fragmentation and self-interest. Down that road lies a mistaken idea of freedom, the right to grasp for ourselves some advantage over others. That path would be one of constant conflict between narrow interests ending in chaos and immobility. It is a certain route to failure.

All the traditions of our past, all the lessons of our heritage, all the promises of our future point to another path, the path of common purpose and the restoration of American values. That path leads to true freedom for our Nation and ourselves. We can take the first steps down that path as we begin to solve our energy problem.

Energy will be the immediate test of our ability to unite this Nation, and it can also be the standard around which we rally. On the battlefield of energy we can win for our Nation a new confidence, and we can seize control again of our common destiny.

After outlining his new policy initiatives, Carter summed up his overall message: “So, the solution of our energy crisis can also help us to conquer the crisis of the spirit in our country.”
an overt Christian metaphor, in closing the President asked that we “commit ourselves together to a rebirth of the American spirit.”

A jeremiad is what Caddell wanted and a jeremiad is what Carter delivered. Calling to mind the standard rhetorical structure of such an address (see the previous chapter), we find all the expected elements in the body of the text. Lamentations about decline abound in Carter’s references to our loss of faith, to our materialism, to the “emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose,” and to the “growing disrespect for government and for churches and for schools, the news media, and other institutions,” among many other signs. The warnings of doom are present as well, both in the form of his frank talk about the consequences of energy dependence as well in the discussion of the implications of taking that path of self-interest Carter spoke of in the passage excerpted above. In fact, at one point Carter explicitly said “This is not a message of happiness or reassurance, but it is the truth and it is a warning.” And, finally, he promises future glory if only we are willing to change. By solving our energy crisis, by passing his energy program, we could solve our spiritual woes at the same time.

There is no other speech quite like this in the history of American politics. It is a speech where a President directly criticized his constituents for believing in “things” instead of God, for prioritizing themselves, instead of others. Moreover, this deeply personal and slightly uncomfortable language was nevertheless still intended to draw support to Carter’s revised energy plan, which now included three major elements.

The first was the windfall profits tax that the President had called for in April 1979. The second was an Energy Mobilization Board. The Board was a controversial idea. It was to have
the authority to eliminate or modify the procedural restrictions that had slowed down the
construction of non-nuclear energy facilities. The irony of creating another government agency
to cut through the red tape produced by other government agencies was apparently lost on Carter.
The third major part of the plan was the creation of an Energy Security Corporation which would
coordinate the production of synfuels, alternatives to oil that are harvested from sources like
coal, biomass and shale. The Corporation, as Carter envisioned it, would be independent,
managed by a seven-member board, and would be responsible for investing tens of billions of
government funds outside of the normal appropriations process. The idea was inspired by the
country’s experience with synthetic rubber in World War II.

There can be little doubt that Carter made a strategic choice at this juncture. He deviated
from the type of rhetoric he had become accustomed to using when speaking about energy for
the previous two and a half years. He violated his earlier reluctance to make political use of his
personal faith, a decision inconsistent with his Baptist philosophy and past political decisions.
He risked raising anew the “weirdo factor.” Above all, it was a decision made on the basis of
polling data—data that claimed such an argument would be accepted. Yet Carter was in crisis,
and that seems to be a precondition for the appearance of this style of rhetoric.

The “crisis of confidence” speech is better remembered by its derisive moniker,
“malaise,” a word not actually found in the text. What few know or recognize, however, is that
Carter would continue to employ the very same type of religious language as he continued to
advocate for his energy program throughout the remainder of 1979.

Indeed, if anything, Carter’s August 30, 1979 remarks at Emory University were even
more spiritual than the crisis of confidence speech was (Carter 1979i). Again, Carter highlighted the lack of meaning in an unchecked consumerism: “We can measure the grandeur of a person’s house or the size of a bank account or the acreage of one’s land, or how fast one’s net worth increases each year. We tend to dwell too much on such things, for they tell us very little about the real meaning of life. For that, we must turn to things which cannot be seen or which cannot be measured, to things like honesty, integrity, the strength of conscience, the love of God, service to others, humility, wisdom.” He argued that “in this time of crisis, both material and spiritual, we must learn to place greater emphasis on the ‘one’ - on the shared values and the shared interests that unite us.” The energy challenge was somewhat in the background but Carter did indicate that he had it in mind. He referred back to his July 15 speech and expressly said, “As we strive to meet the challenges of the energy crisis… we must shape our national life in the light of those fundamental principles which do not change.”

And, again, in that jeremiad style, he reminded his listeners that solving the energy crisis could bring greater, more intangible rewards. In closing, Carter remarked:

I pray that from our present material and spiritual crises, which are well recognized, that there may come a new sense of awakening and a new pursuit of more fulfilling ways to live and to work together as Americans.

Let us confess our failures; let us marshal our inner resources and move on, upward. If we are guided by the best of our common mandates, renewal of American spirit will come.

We in America will find a way to solve our material problems, and as we do, we can rejuvenate the spirit and the confidence of our country.

Despite his earlier protestations, Carter had become a spiritual leader, inviting his audience to “confess” and renew their spirit by overcoming America’s energy challenges.
“Renewal,” “rejuvenate” and other such words have strong Christian implications as well.

Well before his August speech at Emory, however, Carter had elected to follow up his July 15 address with a number of other minor speeches where he would express similar ideas and arguments. One such example was his July 19 appearance before the state presidents of the Future Farmers of America (Carter 1979c). Carter quickly picked up where he had left off just four days ago:

A quality future of our lives is built on a strong today. We’ve got some weaknesses in our country that I tried to outline as best I could Sunday evening. Many things change rapidly in our world, and these changes upset people. New energy facts are hard to accept.

For the first time, Americans have had to recognize the fact that there are limits, that we don’t have the right anymore to squander the precious fuel reserves which our Nation possesses. We’ve got to husband those and to conserve those and to be good stewards over what we have been given. This is what comprises the proper attitude of an American citizen, to assess problems, to face them frankly, to let the truth be known, to search our own lives, our own hearts, our own influence, and say, “What can I do to make my life purer, better, stronger, more admirable, and to let my life be felt meaningfully in the future of a nation which has been so good to me?”

Once more, Carter is appealing to conscience, asking the men and women in attendance to search their lives and hearts to figure out how they can make their lives “purer.” Supporting conservation, recognizing the “new energy facts,” as Carter calls them, is the suggested answer.

It is also worth calling attention to the reference to stewardship. This concept would be a common feature of much of Carter’s energy rhetoric and it is a concept with powerful Biblical referents. A steward, literally, is someone who looks over and cares for someone or something. It is written in the First Epistle of Peter (4: 10) that each Christian is a steward of God’s gifts: “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of
"you has received.” If an individual is truly a good steward of those precious gifts, it is promised that they will be rewarded for it. In a parable that is also found in Luke (19: 11-27), Matthew recalls the story of three servants who are entrusted with the wealth of their master while he is away. Two of the servants put the money to work and double its value; the other servant is afraid and buries his amount in the ground. For his poor management this last servant is thrown out into the dark upon the master’s return (Mt 25: 14-30). The parable’s message is that being ready for Jesus’ return requires that one is faithful in performing the work asked of you, it requires taking proper care of what you have been given (see Keener 1999, 599-602). Carter, then, is relying on this same instruction. The wonders of our environment are a gift from God (the implied source of “what we have been given”). Carter is arguing that we are thus expected to look after them.

As it was, Carter’s religious rhetoric accelerated the following month. In the middle of August, Carter announced that he would be taking a week-long trip down the Mississippi aboard the Delta Queen, a 285 foot, 188 passenger steamer. The trip was part vacation and part electioneering but was sold to the public as, in Powell’s words, “a campaign trip for the energy proposal” (New York Times 1979b). The President and his family personally paid the full $900 fare and joined the other passengers, all of whom had no idea when they booked their reservations that the leader of the free world would be accompanying them. The voyage, scheduled for August 17 through the 24, would take the Carters from St. Paul to St. Louis, with

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9 And not all of them would be happy about it, either. Eleanor Haskins of Milwaukee, for one, complained that the President’s activities disturbed her sleeping. “He woke me up. I thought he wasn’t going to bother us. He’s really politicking” (Irwin 1979).
stops in Wisconsin and Iowa in between. With a rumored primary challenge from Senator Ted Kennedy awaiting, the stop in Iowa was more than a mere coincidence.

The boat was a surreal scene at times. Carter ran laps around the ship’s deck at 6 in the morning. He yelled to crowds assembled on the shore with a megaphone. A man boldly asked the President back to the lounge after dinner for a drink; Carter accepted (Peterson 1979).

The press critically referred to the trip as a “baby-kissing tour” (Coffey 1979) but I would venture to suggest another description, borrowing, a bit, from Neil Diamond: Brother Jimmy’s Traveling Salvation Show. For at each stop Carter made roughly the same speech with the same basic religious structure.

The first part involved reminding people exactly how much God had blessed America. In Wabasha, MN: “We are a nation which has indeed been blessed by God with blessings which exceed those of any other peoples on Earth. We’re a nation of freedom. We’re a nation of strength, of courage, of vitality. We’re a nation which has always been able and eager to meet any challenge, no matter how difficult it might have been, to solve any problem, no matter how complex it might be, or to answer any question which confronts the people of the United States of America.” (Carter 1979d). In Prairie du Chien, WI: “God has blessed us above all other peoples with natural resources, not only a great river, one of the best avenues for traffic and also freight and also passengers in the whole world- one of the most enjoyable trips, I think, imaginable anywhere- but, of course, we’ve also been blessed with energy reserves. In our Nation we’ve got 25 percent of all the energy reserves in the whole world. All the OPEC nations in the Mideast put together only have 5 percent. So, God’s blessed us with a strong nation and
with a nation that has enough natural resources.” (Carter 1979e). In Muscatine, IA: “The last thing I want to say is don’t ever forget, any of you, that we do live in a country where we’ve been blessed by God with almost every possible human need and every human advantage. We do have rich land. We do have freedom. We have a good free enterprise system. We’ve got a democracy.” (Carter 1979f). And at a town meeting in Burlington: “God’s blessed us in many wonderful ways, with rich land, a democratic, free government, a pride in the individualism of each person, the right to be different, the right to speak our minds, the right to control our own Government, the right to unify ourselves in times of challenge…” (Carter 1979g).

The next step consisted of mildly criticizing America for squandering those blessings, for taking God’s beneficence for granted. In Wabasha: “and it’s let us realize for the first time in our great country that we do have limits, and we cannot afford to waste any more, as we have wasted, what God gave us in the past” (Carter 1979d). In St. Louis: “We’ve got so much to be thankful for. Sometimes we forget how much God has blessed us in the United States of America” (Carter 1979h). On other occasions, Carter could be even more blunt. At a town meeting in Tampa a week after the conclusion of his trip, Carter said, “I think for us to recognize that we’ve got to save and not waste is really compatible with what the Bible teaches. God doesn’t want us to waste what He gives. I think the fact that we have to now share with each other is a very good principle on which to base a family’s style of living” (Carter 1979j).

The last step was making the pitch for his program. And whether the real goal of the trip was to improve his positioning for November 1980 or not, Carter did speak extensively about energy at each stop. Not everyone was a fan of Carter’s message, though. For instance, the
Christian Science Monitor (1979) took the President to task for all his harping on God’s blessings. They wished to remind Carter that “All nations, like all individuals, are equally blessed. It is in perceiving God’s blessing, accepting it, conducting themselves so as not to obscure it that individuals and nations partake of it.”

Carter did not make much use of religious rhetoric that September. But he did reintroduce these themes in conjunction with a highly anticipated visit from Pope John Paul II in October. It was the charismatic new Pontiff’s first visit to the United States. Carter was both impressed and moved by the outpouring of affection for the head of the Catholic Church, and he shrewdly chose to tie this reaction to the existence of the crisis he had alerted the country to in July. In Albuquerque on October 11, Carter reflected:

I knew that they would have tens of thousands of people, maybe hundreds of thousands of people who would come out to meet him, but to see literally millions of people assembled on the streets of Chicago and Boston and Philadelphia and New York and even in the rural area of Iowa and, of course, in Washington, was a pleasant surprise and an exciting surprise for me.

I think there’s a hunger in our country for decency and commitment, for the binding of wounds, for unity, for mutual respect, for compassion, and for love; and this to me is heartening. And I think the reception that he got transcended any kind of minor religious differences we have, because we worship the same God. And this, I think, is a good solid base for Americans to meet any possible challenge to us (Carter 1979k).

Carter claimed here that America’s “hunger” for meaning and shared faith in “the same God” were “a good solid base” on which the country’s problems might be solved. From there, Carter transitioned into a discussion of the specific challenge of energy. He continued:

We live in the greatest and the strongest nation on Earth. It’s the strongest nation on Earth militarily. We need fear no one, and we will never be
second to any other country in military strength. And, of course, we are the strongest nation on Earth economically, because God blessed us with such great natural resources. In the past, we’ve not always handled them carefully. We’ve not been constant good stewards of what we’ve inherited. But I really believe that the recent reminder that there is a limit to how much waste Americans can accept in our society is healthy for us.

Carter admitted that “it’s not been possible for us in the past to marshal our great strength and to unify ourselves to meet a challenge that was not quite so easy to see- the threat to our security from the importation next year of $70 billion worth of foreign oil.” But he did volunteer his hope that America was making progress and that meetings like the one he just held with the Western state Governors would lead the way towards a solution. Note, that in these remarks Carter returns to the concept of stewardship as he continues to emphasize that our resources are blessings from God (and hence should not be wasted), just as he did on his Delta Queen trip.

In remarks to an AFL-CIO convention in San Diego, Carter spent about a fifth of his time discussing energy (he also dealt with the problems of inflation, SALT II and a variety of labor issues). The Pope’s teachings illustrated, Carter observed, that these problems could be solved if only we abandoned our selfishness (and, by implication, accepted higher energy prices as a reasonable sacrifice):

The visit of Pope John Paul has given us a chance to reflect on our basic values and the challenges to them. We cannot permit this chance to slip away. Let’s seize this opportunity and make the most of it.

Perhaps the greatest gift the Pope gave us in his brief visit to our country was a chance to rethink what these four words mean, “One nation, under God.” He lifted our eyes from petty concerns, sometimes selfish concerns, from the cynicism and the indifference that sometimes divides Americans one from another, to show us that we can unite for common purposes, as Americans, as children of God, or as citizens of a fragile world.
Now let us rededicate ourselves to a simple truth that together we can shape a bright future… (Carter 1979).

Carter could be even more creative in linking John Paul II’s message to his own energy goals if he had to. One such example was his speech to the Annual Convention of the National Conference of Catholic Charities on October 15, 1979. Obviously, this organization is most concerned with social welfare policy, and not energy legislation. Hence, Carter called to mind the Pope’s emphasis on the importance of families and then argued that his energy policy would help strengthen them, thereby heeding the Pontiff’s advice. It was a compelling point to make, especially before a group of devout Catholics. Carter first said,

There’s one aspect of our national life where we need to put our partnership to even better use- and I talked about it when I was with you 3 years ago, in 1976- that is the problem of the families. This is a subject of pivotal concern to all of us and was especially during Pope John Paul’s American visit. Families are the foundation of a healthy and a vibrant society. They carry out the timeless tasks of nurturing, supporting, and caring for their own members, in many different cultures and many different communities. They provide irreplaceable strength and shelter for one another.

Today, what Pope John XXIII called “the first and essential cell of human society”- that is, a family- is in trouble. Many families have already been strained to the breaking point by social and economic forces beyond their own control. Some families indeed have broken. (Carter 1979m)

Carter argued, however, that his energy proposals could be part of the solution. The President later went on, “I’ve also asked Congress to appropriate $1.6 billion this year to ease the burden of rising energy costs on poor people, who most need this assistance, and then I’ve also asked the Congress to provide $2.4 billion annually for the next years for this purpose. With your help, we can win approval of the windfall profits tax on the profits of the oil companies, which will help to finance this and other programs to help the low-income families.” The Pope said the
family was essential and yet endangered. Carter’s energy program will help families. Catholics follow the Pope. Ergo, Catholics should support Carter’s energy problem. It was smart logic.

Interestingly, this was not the only occasion on which Carter explained, before a religious gathering, how energy related to their faith. What is clear, though, is that Carter’s January 10, 1980 remarks at a White House briefing held for religious leaders were nothing but a more direct and extensive statement of the same ideas he had willingly been discussing before the wider public for months.

It might seem strange to some, not to you, that the conservation of oil has a religious connotation. But when God created the Earth and gave human beings dominion over it, it was with the understanding on the part of us, then and down through the generations, that we are indeed stewards under God’s guidance, to protect not only those who are fortunate enough to grasp an advantage or a temporary material blessing or enjoyment but to husband those bases for enjoyment and for a quality of life for those less fortunate in our own generation and especially for those who will come after us.

Our country is comprised of profligate wasters of the Earth’s precious resources, not because of an innate selfishness, but because we’ve been overly endowed by God with those material blessings. We’ve seldom experienced limits on our lives because of a withholding of the production of food or fiber or building materials or energy itself. Access to warm oceans, wonderful climates, rich land- God has given us these things. But lately in the last few years, or particularly the last few months, we’ve begun to see that we not only have a responsibility to now and future Americans but also to those who live on Earth now and will live in the future (Carter 1980a).

It should be clear that there is nothing unique about these passages. The main points- the idea of stewardship, the idea that our resources are blessings from God, the corresponding mandate not to waste them- are all common markers of the rhetorical examples I have already analyzed, rhetorical examples easily found in remarks addressed to secular audiences, too.
Carter’s rhetoric on energy pivoted away from religion at the start of 1980. The main reason for this departure was that the international geopolitical climate had fundamentally changed. Iranian radicals seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, taking sixty Americans hostage. Over Christmas, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. The turmoil in the Mideast rapidly spread. In Saudi Arabia, religious fanatics took control of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the holiest shrine of Islam. It took two weeks of fighting before the Saudis were able to evict the occupiers. In Pakistan, 20,000 rioters attacked the American embassy in Islamabad in response to false rumors that the U.S. had been behind the events at the Grand Mosque. Two Americans were killed. With so much of the oil producing world in chaos, and with American interests on the defensive in those countries, it became far easier to talk about energy in terms of national security as opposed to religious values. The change in emphasis was readily apparent in Carter’s 1980 State of the Union address: “The crises in Iran and Afghanistan have dramatized a very important lesson: Our excessive dependence on foreign oil is a clear and present danger to our Nation’s security. The need has never been more urgent. At long last, we must have a clear, comprehensive energy policy for the United States” (Carter 1980b).

Like Eisenhower’s campaign for foreign aid, Carter’s energy campaign was a broad and diverse political use of religious rhetoric. Carter repeatedly made religious arguments over a period of six months. He openly discussed Biblical ideas like stewardship. He regularly claimed that America’s natural resources were a gift from God and hence had to be conserved. And he capitalized on Pope John Paul II’s pilgrimage by linking the Pontiff’s religious message on family and selflessness to his own policies. Eisenhower’s attempt was mainly unsuccessful, as
we have seen. Carter’s strategy did not produce much better results.

To start with opinion, Carter’s religious rhetoric in the crisis of confidence speech apparently fell flat with the public. On July 13, 1979, Carter received the support of 29% of Americans. On August 3, the first reading post-speech, he clocked in at 32% (Ragsdale 2009, 236). This change is less than the 6% that would lead us to be confident in its significance.

Plus, Carter’s approval mark on August 3 was nothing unusual. As Chart 5.1 illustrates, Carter’s approval hovered in the range of 29% to 33% for over 5 consecutive months. The event that finally changed the President’s fortunes was the embassy seizure in Iran, which generated a strong rally-round-the-flag boost beginning in mid-November. So, in the longer term, it appears that Carter’s religious rhetoric did little to dispel the negative vibes surrounding him at the time.
Even more troubling for Carter is the finding that his religious arguments, made repeatedly in the months after July 15, did not have any effect on the public’s evaluation of his handling of the energy issue, either. Chart 5.2 tracks the ABC News/Harris polls on energy. The relatively flat lines indicate that over all of 1979 the public consistently and overwhelmingly disapproved of Carter’s performance on energy. In every poll, between 72% and 83% of respondents gave Carter a negative grade. His change in rhetoric did nothing to alter that pattern.

![Chart 5.2: ABC News/Harris on Energy Policy](chart)

Chart 5.3 provides the same data for the NBC News/AP poll. The results are much the same: flat trend lines. In the second half of the year, with Carter’s religious rhetorical strategy in full swing, never did more than 4% of the public consider Carter’s performance on energy “excellent.”

It should be said, however, that Carter may very well have short-circuited any of the opinion benefits that he had been accruing following his July 15 address. A survey taken by
Roger Seasonwein Associates, a New York based polling organization, reported that the number of respondents feeling that the President was doing a “good” job had risen from 21% on Saturday the 14th to 30% on Monday the 16th (Washington Post 1979). Likewise, the New York Times/CBS News Poll reported that Carter’s approval had surged to 37% in the aftermath of the speech, as compared to a rating of 26% the week before (Clymer 1979).

The story is complicated by the turmoil within the Administration later that week. One of the criticisms that Carter repeatedly heard at Camp David was that he was being poorly served by certain members of his Cabinet and staff. The truth was Carter had been worried about this issue for quite some time. On July 17, the President finally acted, requesting that all members of
his cabinet and senior staff submit their resignations. Carter said that he would then decide which ones to accept. In the end, he let five cabinet members go: Attorney General Griffin Bell, Secretary of the Treasury Michael Blumenthal, Secretary of Transportation Brock Adams, Energy Secretary James Schlesinger and HEW Secretary Joseph Califano.

The changes were universally criticized by those on both the right and the left. It was Califano’s dismissal, however, that led to the most outcry. The HEW boss certainly had his enemies. He was abrasive, and often pursued his own agenda at the expense of the President’s. But he was equally beloved by his defenders who looked favorably upon his intelligence and managerial skills and admired his earlier role in constructing Johnson’s Great Society programs.

In a more general sense, the departure of so many members at once made it seem as if the government was falling apart. Carter made a bad situation worse by naming Hamilton Jordan chief of staff, another move widely seen as misguided. Jordan was personally disorganized, had little government experience and was held in open contempt by some members of Congress, including Speaker Tip O’Neill. To the public, Jordan would be mainly known for allegations of unsavory personal behavior, including charges that he spat Amaretto and cream on a woman at a bar, that he made lewd comments about the cleavage of the wife of the Egyptian ambassador and that he had used cocaine at New York’s Studio 54.

Obviously, it is reasonable to expect that these changes collectively diminished the positive effects the malaise speech might have had on public opinion. Still, it should be said that not all of the polls supported the findings of the two positive ones mentioned above. The NBC News/AP poll released on the 18th, for instance, indicated that Carter’s ratings had not moved at
all (Clymer 1979). And no matter what, if this increase in public support could not be sustained for more than a few days, it was not very meaningful.

An analysis of the editorial reaction to Carter’s “Crisis of Confidence” speech also casts some doubt on the possible persuasiveness of the President’s religious rhetoric. As Table 5.1 shows, 49 editorials on energy appeared in the four newspapers in the week following the address. Fully 55% of these commentaries, 27 articles in total, were negative towards Carter and received scores of 1 or 2. In contrast, just 12 articles (24.5%) were positive, receiving scores of 4 or 5. On average, any given article was scored a 2.35, indicating that Carter’s editorial coverage was solidly negative.

Opinion writers seemed willing to praise Carter for his rhetoric, but they were consistently able to separate the merit of those arguments from the merit of the policies that Carter was arguing for. For instance, the Chicago Tribune (1979) wrote “It’s hard to quarrel with his (Carter’s) extended homily on our moral shortcomings; being reminded of our sins can have a therapeutic effect on the conscience, as when a bank robber goes to confession- especially if one can then feel that he has expiated his sins without further inconvenience. Mr. Carter may not have the charisma of a Roosevelt or a Kennedy, but he does have an apparently genuine sincerity…” But the Tribune then ripped Carter’s policy prescriptions as “vague, trivial, of the ‘appoint a commission’ nature, or timed so as not to be painful until he was long out of office.” The paper felt that parts of the plan were “utterly illogical” and “gimmicky” and it argued that the President had not asked enough from the country. In fact, they claimed “the greatest personal sacrifice demanded from Americans is the stretching of credulity and logic.”
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<td>George Will</td>
<td>“The Silverware Criterion”</td>
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**Dates:** 7/16 – 7/22

**Average Score:** 2.35

**Positive Articles:** 12 (24.5%)

**Negative Articles:** 27 (55.1%)

**Mixed/Neutral Articles:** 10 (20.4%)
Nick Thimmesch (1979) was a second to voice approval of Carter’s rhetoric while disapproving of his programs. For Thimmesch, “President Carter really gave two speeches Sunday night. The first was a well-delivered sermon, one that could touch all but the most hedonistic or cynical American. The second offered a refurbished energy program, failed to resolve serious questions, and, in several ways, contradicted the first.” Carter’s moralizing, Thimmesch thought, “could move people to think about doing with less, to live more simply and more meaningfully, and to strengthen family and personal relationships.” But, Thimmesch maintained that Carter’s energy proposals were nonetheless beset by troubling questions and they failed to tackle head-on the obstacles posed by environmental restrictions and the anti-nuclear lobby.

Hobart Rowen (1979) also agreed that the actions Carter was taking did not rise to the level of the call for action, writing, “As rhetoric and as a battle plan to restore his viability as a presidential candidate, the Carter plan has elements of brilliance. As a program to meet the nation’s short-term and long-term, energy requirements, it is a disappointment.” Rowen, too, felt that Carter did not call for enough sacrifice. Indeed, this accusation of timidity was a very common refrain for the President’s critics (see, for example, Kraft 1979; Neikirk 1979; New York Times 1979a).

This is not to say that Carter’s rhetoric was popular with everyone. As it was, arguably his words created as many enemies as they gained him friends. Rowland Evans and Robert Novak (1979) felt that by this speech Carter was following the path taken by Woodrow Wilson in blaming the country for his own personal failures. They accurately pointed out that in the first
two years of his presidency, Carter had said nothing about the impact of assassinations and Vietnam on the national psyche. It was “not until his own ratings tumbled,” they wrote, “was there such intense concern with public morality.” This was the exact type of reaction that Mondale had feared.

Bob Wiedrich (1979), in turn, argued that the president’s message was “defeatist.” Wiedrich felt that Carter “really should not have lectured the American people so severely about their materialistic instincts and other short-comings. He should have looked instead to the failings of his own administration for the reasons behind the lack of confidence in government he so casually laid at all our doors.” The President, Wiedrich said, is “supposed to be a leader, not a preacher.”

Michael Novak (1979) went even further. Playing off the Moses comparisons, Novak noted that “Moses did not go up on the mountain to consult a public relations delegation from the discontented and wandering people he was trying to lead. Moses, moreover, came down to command.” In contrast, Carter “doesn’t lead. He is led.” Novak felt that the President’s performance was “disgusting” because “In the name of spiritual values, Carter tried to save himself.” He had “shamefully” tried to use theology for “his own partisan purposes,” Novak claimed.

Beyond the pushback against the religiosity of the address, Carter was also hurt by the boomerang effect his cabinet dismissals created. The firings turned even initially supportive outlets against him. For instance, following the speech the Los Angeles Times (1979a) printed one of the most supportive editorials that Carter would receive. The paper wrote that Carter
“showed considerable skill Sunday night in running the obstacle course that he had designed to test his leadership.” His message was “clear” and “there was much truth in what he said.” The *Times* was very complimentary towards Carter’s proposals and they specifically applauded his ideas to expand public transportation and cut through red tape by means of an EMB. However, the paper changed its tune following the shake-up. On the 20th, the editorial board (1979b) wrote that the Administration’s “theatrics” were “humiliating if not bizarre.” Certain tactics, like the widely publicized report cards staffers were asked to fill out, were ridiculed as “childish and demoralizing.” “What does all this have to do with the compelling problems of energy and economics that Carter spoke of the other night?” the *Times* asked. They answered, “It has nothing to do with them. What the exercise of the last few days has been concerned with is scapegoating, revenge and the effort to impose a rigid, narrow and certainly unhealthy standard of political loyalty throughout the Administration. Only the White House political strategists aren’t willing to identify it so honestly.”

In sum, opinion writers were generally not favorable towards Carter in the week after the malaise speech. Aggregate statistics bear this out. Those commentators who praised his rhetoric often at the same time criticized his policy prescriptions. Others attacked both. And the perception of Carter’s energy program was dramatically altered for the worse after he decided to purge his administration.

Carter’s religious strategy was most successful- though by no means entirely so- on the floor of Congress. In 1980, Congress finally took action on the three major elements of Carter’s second energy plan, the windfall profits tax, the Energy Mobilization Board (EMB) and the
Energy Security Corporation (ESC). The legislature adopted the tax and the ESC but soundly rejected the Board.

In the House, Carter resoundingly won the balloting on the windfall profits tax and the ESC by margins of 302-107 and 317-93. In the Senate, the story is much the same. Carter won the windfall profits tax and ESC votes 66-31 and 78-12, respectively. It is a level of support that cannot even be fairly compared the normally razor sharp margins Carter dealt with in the Senate.

This is not to say everything was roses for Carter’s energy plan in Congress, however. The EMB was put on the shelf on June 27, 1980 when the House voted to adopt an amendment by Rep. Samuel Devine that killed the House-Senate conference committee report. Carter lost this particular vote 232-131. This was one of Carter’s worst showings that session.

It is also worth mentioning one related vote. In early June Congress overrode Carter’s veto of a joint resolution that sought to bar the President from imposing a surcharge on imported oil. Carter included the charge as part of his March 14 anti-inflation program but it obviously composed part of Carter’s energy policy as well. As it is, Congress was only given the authority to block the charge under the provisions of the recently passed windfall profits tax legislation. The House and Senate veto overrides were Carter’s worst defeats of the year. He lost the votes with just 10 Senators and merely 34 Representatives backing him.

These setbacks notwithstanding, Congress did ultimately give Carter the majority of what he had asked for, including the windfall profits tax, which remained the heart of his policy. There were concessions, of course. In the final windfall profits bill, a variable rate replaced the flat rate Carter wanted, the revenues were marked for the general treasury fund rather than for
specific energy purposes, and the tax was not made permanent but would instead expire no later than October 1993 (Carter 1982, 123). But still, as Kaufman (1993, 177) observes, “These measures, along with earlier legislation deregulating natural gas prices and gradually decontrolling domestic oil, represented the most sweeping energy legislation in the nation’s history and a great personal achievement for the president.”

Most historical accounts tend to treat the malaise speech as an isolated event, a one-time example of a devout President consciously examining the soul of his nation. This chapter has shown without a doubt that that is an incomplete picture at best. In fact, the malaise speech was merely the starting point of a coherent and consistent religious rhetorical strategy that Carter used in trying to facilitate the adoption of his expensive energy policies. The strategy was no more than partially successful. Carter may have seen some immediate increase in his personal approval ratings but it was extremely short-lived, doing nothing to arrest the long term cratering of his meager public support. His approval ratings for his handling of the energy issue, in particular, never budged. Carter’s editorial coverage in the week following the malaise speech was by and large critical with even those who found themselves favorably disposed to his language attacking his policy ideas. And finally, Carter was well supported on several key votes in the House and Senate— but then again he was less supported on others and he was served a crushing defeat when Congress failed to approve the EMB.

In the end, in some ways the religious rhetoric that Carter used to sell his energy program was brave, courageous and inspiring. The President was right to point out the very real psychological problems that afflicted America after the traumas of the 60s and the early 70s.
Perhaps the country would be better off if our leaders more frequently invited us to reach such heights. The kind of sacrifice Carter asked for seems to be needed even more today as the country continues to grapple with the same unresolved energy issues. Still, in other ways, Carter sounded purely ridiculous. It’s hard not to agree with Roger Ricklefs (1979), who wrote at the time, “One person may spend the weekend in church while another spends it in a disco. It’s hard to tell which contributes more to the energy crisis.” It seems clear that the American people did, indeed, at least somewhat agree with him.
Chapter 6

Arms, Armageddon and the Evil Empire: Ronald Reagan’s Religious Rhetoric on Defense Spending

Ronald Reagan was a surprising patron saint to religious Americans. As it turns out, what one believes about Reagan and his faith is often what one wants to believe about Reagan and his faith.

Like most of the men who have reached the pinnacle of power, Reagan grew up in a religious household (Smith 2006, 326-338). It was Reagan’s mother who introduced him to organized religion. Nelle Reagan was baptized into the Disciples of Christ church in 1910. For the remainder of her life, she would be an active member of the Disciples parish in Dixon, IL, leading Bible study groups and writing for the church’s newspaper. Nelle encouraged her son to follow her example and, in his early years, Reagan did. As a teenager, he, too, taught Sunday school and led Bible study. When it came time to attend college, Reagan chose a small school, Eureka, that was affiliated with the Disciples.

Yet Reagan’s childhood habits did not persist into adulthood. Reagan was at best only an infrequent attendee at church services over the course of his life. In an article he wrote for Modern Screen in 1950, Reagan openly admitted that his participation in organized religion was limited and his beliefs were vague. Reagan did not find himself in the pews any more once he became president, either. This fact was noted with much consternation by many of his most fervent supporters. Reagan defended his absence on Sundays by arguing that his presence in church could distract or even jeopardize the security of other worshippers. However, this excuse
seems to be a patent rationalization. Safety concerns have not stopped other presidents, including his own vice president, George H.W. Bush, from attending services. Safety concerns did not stop Reagan from speaking to students, or veterans or businessmen or any of the multitude of organizations he addressed on a daily basis. Plus, Reagan always had the option of instituting private services in the White House as an alternative, just as Nixon had done before him. But he did not do so.

In terms of personal conduct, although Reagan was faithful and devoted to his wife, Nancy, the fact remains that he had divorced and remarried. The New Testament is fairly clear in its prohibition of divorce and remarriage: “But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Mt 5: 32). Over the course of American history, members of the evangelical community who divorced were ostracized and faced possible expulsion from their congregations (Balmer 2008, 112-113). As such, failed marriages had appreciably hindered the presidential aspirations of other formidable men who preceded Reagan, men like Nelson Rockefeller and Adlai Stevenson.

However, Reagan’s divorce was not the only potential black mark in his biography. Reagan was also a former liberal Hollywood actor, a prominent member of a community that Christian conservatives typically regard with suspicion and hostility. Further, Reagan could hardly be accused of selflessness; he gave less than 2% of his sizable annual income to charity (Williams 2008, 141). Finally, Reagan had an estranged relationship with his son, Michael. Michael was Reagan’s adopted son from his first marriage to actress Jane Wyman. In a
wounded memoir published in 1987, Michael revealed that his father had never even bothered to come see him play football in high school (Schieffer and Gates 1989, 173). All of these complications did not exactly square with ideal Christian ethics.

And then there was the astrology (Benze 2005, 113-117). In one of the many unflattering tell-alls about the Reagan Administration authored by embittered former aides, ex-Chief of Staff Don Regan wrote in 1988 that the First Lady had fallen under the spell of an astrologer named Joan Quigley. According to Regan, the scheduling of major presidential events, including summits with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, depended on the content of the readings Nancy Reagan received from Quigley. In her own memoirs, Nancy explains how she began to turn to Quigley for comfort after the attempt on her husband’s life in 1981. Quigley had shown Mrs. Reagan charts that identified the period around the attempt as a dangerous time for the couple. However, Nancy denied that any political or policy decisions were influenced by her interest in astrology. Christian conservatives were dismayed, either way. One, broadcasting executive George Otis, collected the signatures of over 25,000 Christians urging the Reagans to “just say no” to astrology.

The truth of these tales is up for debate, though an interest in astrology certainly seems in character for Reagan, a man who did not hide his many other mystical beliefs. For example, Reagan believed in visitations, claiming to have heard his father’s voice from beyond the grave during the old man’s funeral. The President was convinced that his mother had a gift for premonition and he thought he had inherited those same talents. He and Nancy were likewise committed to superstition. They knocked on wood, avoided walking under ladders, and observed
other similar practices. Reagan worried that Lincoln haunted the White House.

Given his background, the question must be posed as to exactly how sincere Reagan’s efforts at religious outreach were? Indeed, Reagan delivered little of importance to Christian conservatives, despite publicly pledging himself to their goals during the 1980 campaign. In August 1980 Reagan told a Christian rally in Dallas, “I know you can’t endorse me. But I want you to know that I endorse you and what you are doing” (Williams 2008, 140).

In truth, Reagan’s backtracking on the agenda of the religious right actually predated his presidency. As Governor of California, Reagan had signed into law the most liberal abortion bill in the nation. That law, the Therapeutic Abortion Act of 1967, facilitated more than one million abortions. Similarly, by the end of his presidency, almost all of the evangelical agenda remained unfulfilled. Abortion was still legal. School prayer was still not. The pornographic film industry flourished. X-rated tapes had first become available in 1977 but, due to plummeting production costs, by 1986 the Wall Street Journal was reporting that over three quarters of the nation’s video stores now stocked dirty movies.

Reagan did not expend much energy to change any of these things. Mostly, he offered limited symbolic support to the movement. For example, Reagan would speak to anti-abortion protesters every year when they rallied in Washington on the anniversary of Roe v. Wade. Significantly, however, Reagan would communicate with these activists via telephone, instead of in person, thereby ensuring that he would not be seen at the rally on the evening news. Reagan declined to support the Human Life Statute in 1981 and the Family Protection Act of 1981, both of which would have banned abortions. In another move designed to protect his standing, rather
then risk his own political capital on school prayer, Reagan encouraged religious leaders to lobby on his behalf. He promised that he would be on their side if the issue ever moved forward. In Cannon’s (1991, 813) informed opinion, anything Reagan said on prayer was therefore “never more than throwaway lines intended to comfort the so-called Religious Right or some other element of the conservative constituency.” Reagan did have his attorney general Ed Meese form a government commission to investigate the effects of pornography, however the Department of Justice ultimately did not act on many of its recommendations, beyond cracking down on those pornographers with ties to organized crime. In another mostly symbolic gesture, Reagan appointed some visible evangelicals like James Watt and C. Everett Koop to important government posts. Watt promised upon his appointment to follow the guidance of Scripture “to occupy the land until He returns” (Wilentz 2008, 140). Koop was co-author of the anti-abortion screed Whatever Happened to the Human Race? Yet Reagan did not always back what these men did in office. In truth then, all of this activity operated at the margins. Reagan’s actual legislative accomplishments, like the Adolescent Family Life Act, which provided federal funding for abstinence-based sex education, were relatively “small ball” (Balmer 2008, 109-124; Ehrman 2005, 171-181; Williams 2008).

This material hints at what was meant earlier about what one believes about Reagan and his faith often being what one wants to believe. If you are a Reagan acolyte, then you probably agree with Meese, who claimed, “He (Reagan) had a very strong personal faith, which came up as a natural thing in private conversation. The president was able to talk about religion in a comfortable way, better than almost any person I’ve ever met. He did not want to parade it
before the public…” These individuals were more than willing to write off Reagan’s lack of personal piety and his half-hearted attempts at policy change. If you are a Reagan antagonist, however, your perspective probably falls somewhere closer to that of Miguel D’Escoto, a priest and former Nicaraguan foreign minister, who said, “he is not a person who gives a hoot about religion. The religious dimension was not there, and God became someone to manipulate and to use for the advancement of Reagan’s purposes. He used God, playing with the hearts of the American people, touching chords that would produce the effect that he was looking for” (Strober and Strober 2003, 55-56).

The truth, as always, probably lies somewhere in the middle. Reagan certainly seemed to genuinely believe that America had a divine mission in the world. He was voicing a “sacramental vision” of American history well before he became a politician (Heclo 2003). Yet Reagan also seemed more than capable of being quite strategic when it came to the political use of religion. The manner in which he navigated the controversies over school prayer and abortion proves as much.

In contrast to the debate about Reagan’s sincerity, there is no debating that Reagan was a supremely skilled public speaker. He was not called the “Great Communicator” for nothing. Reagan had cultivated these talents at an early age, first as a sports announcer, then as a B-movie Hollywood actor (he appeared in fifty two features), and later as a spokesperson for the General Electric company. Reagan had a gift that allowed him to translate complex ideas into simple points that the great majority of Americans could understand. He was always pushing his speechwriters to shorten their sentences, to condense paragraphs, to use more common words
(Thompson 1993, 90-91). Often in practice that guidance meant framing those ideas with religious words or symbols. Billy Graham once told Reagan “I would think that you have talked about God more than any other president since Abraham Lincoln” (Pemberton 1997, 138).

Some questioned how someone so publicly devout could at the same time be so outwardly antagonistic towards U.S. adversaries. Nevertheless, despite what his critics may have said, Reagan was no warmonger. He regularly told his public audiences that he had already seen four wars in his lifetime and that he could not bear the thought of another. As he saw it, a nuclear war could never be won and hence must never be fought. He made this point constantly in his speeches.

In fact, in private Reagan was known to fret that someday a simple misunderstanding between his country and Russia might precipitate a nuclear Armageddon- as in the end of the world as foretold by the Bible. Reagan had first expressed an interest in the contents of the Book of Revelation in the late 60s and he quickly became “hooked” on it (Cannon 1991, 288-291). As Reagan understood it, certain events in Revelation, like a plague, could be interpreted as a prophecy of nuclear war. As his political strategist Stuart Spencer remembered, “He (Reagan) was absolutely obsessed with the threat from Russia; the whole nuclear picture revolved around that threat. He used to talk about Armageddon. To my mind, Armageddon tied into his concern about the nuclear chaos that he knew about as president, from the information he would get in his national security and other briefings. These were the things he worried about. He had a vision about them; he read about them, thought about them, and talked to a lot of people about them” (Strober and Strober 2003, 147).
Reagan staffers worried about how the public would react if they knew of this presidential fixation. However, despite being explicitly questioned on the connection between his beliefs about Armageddon and U.S. defense policy in his second debate with Walter Mondale in 1984, the issue never really materialized. That does not mean that Reagan kept these thoughts entirely to himself, though. On an occasion or two, Reagan did explain his apocalyptic visions to the public, one example being a December 1983 interview he did with People magazine (Reagan 1983j). The reporters asked Reagan about a curious quote that had been attributed to him by the Jerusalem Post. In that exchange, Reagan had suggested that this generation might well witness the end of times. Reagan explained his comments to People as such:

I’ve never done that publicly. I have talked here, and then I wrote people, because some theologians quite some time ago were telling me, calling attention to the fact that theologians have been studying the ancient prophecies- What would portend the coming of Armageddon? - and have said that never, in the time between the prophecies up until now has there ever been a time in which so many of the prophecies are coming together. There have been times in the past when people thought the end of the world was coming, and so forth, but never anything like this.

And one of them, the first one who ever broached this to me- and I won’t use his name; I don’t have permission to. He probably would give it, but I'm not going to ask- had held a meeting with the then head of the German Government, years ago when the war was over, and did not know that his hobby was theology. And he asked this theologian what did he think was the next great news event, worldwide. And the theologian, very wisely, said, “Well, I think that you’re asking that question in a case that you’ve had a thought along that line.” And he did. It was about the prophecies and so forth.

So, no. I’ve talked conversationally about that.

With these fears in the back of his mind, Reagan aggressively sought arms reductions, more so in his second term. Showing his resolve, he ignored substantial resistance from
conservative hardliners. Reagan had no desire to be the one that triggered an age of darkness.

The President felt that there was no divide between the U.S and the Soviets that could not be bridged. Reagan seemed to not understand how the Soviets could possibly fear American aggression. He believed that a little face-to-face conversation might be all that was needed to clear things up (Pemberton 1997, 150). Another of his rather bizarre private fantasies revolved around the gains that might result if each country were confronted by a common external enemy—aliens. His aides considered this to be one of his “loopier” notions but it probably, like so many of Reagan’s ideas, had grounding in a classic movie, 1951’s *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. In that film an alien threatens to destroy the world if nuclear weapons are not eliminated. Reagan spoke quite often about the movie’s enduring impact on him (Wilentz 2008, 138). And, again, like his thoughts about Armageddon, sometimes Reagan would articulate this vision to a wider public as well; for instance, consider his December 1985 visit to Fallston High School in Maryland (Reagan 1985g):

I couldn’t help but- one point in our discussions privately with General Secretary Gorbachev- when you stop to think that we’re all God’s children, wherever we may live in the world, I couldn’t help but say to him, just think how easy his task and mine might be in these meetings that we held if suddenly there was a threat to this world from some other species, from another planet, outside in the universe. We’d forget all the little local differences that we have between our countries, and we would find out once and for all that we really are all human beings here on this Earth together. Well, I don’t suppose we can wait for some alien race to come down and threaten us, but I think that between us we can bring about that realization.

Despite Reagan’s concerns about Armageddon, and despite his belief that Cold War adversities could be done away with, Reagan nevertheless passionately believed it was imperative for the United States to upgrade its defenses (Pach 2003; Zakheim 1997). Like so
many observers, Reagan concluded that U.S. strength and security had dangerously eroded during the 1970s. By the early part of the decade, the Soviets had reached strategic parity with the U.S. The U.S.S.R. had dramatically enhanced their naval strength and tactical air force and had even gained numerical superiority in certain weapons like intercontinental ballistic missiles. Over the years the Soviets had been spending considerably more on defense than the U.S., despite their much smaller economy.

President Carter had possibly exacerbated these trends. Carter had campaigned in 1976 on a platform that included significant reductions in defense spending. Within a month of his election, he set a goal of cutting the defense budget by 5% to 7%. Carter was unable to deliver on that specific promise, but he was still successful in cancelling or cutting a variety of weapons systems, including the neutron bomb, the MX missile, the B-1 bomber and the Trident submarine. Carter, of course, reversed himself following a series of events that destabilized the U.S. position abroad, including the invasion of Afghanistan and the hostage crisis in Iran. In his last budget, Carter would propose a 5.5% real increase in defense spending. It was an irrelevant gesture—Carter had already lost the election to Reagan two months earlier—but it was vindication for the Californian all the same. Reagan had been warning his radio listeners about the deterioration of the U.S. military since 1975. Now, as the new president, he was finally in position to do something about it. Accordingly, he would continue to press for increases in defense spending throughout his entire term in office, even as palpable progress with the Soviets during his last couple of years seemed to diminish the need for it.

It is another of those Reagan paradoxes that a man so concerned about the onset of
Armageddon would at the same time be so committed to providing the supplies that might make it happen. Yet this duality was merely another manifestation of Reagan’s supreme self-confidence. Even if Armageddon was imminent, Reagan thought that he had the personal capacity to avoid it. “This was one of the intellectual contradictions in Reagan’s thinking. He sees himself as a romantic, heroic figure who believes in the power of a hero to overcome even Armageddon,” his security advisor Bud McFarlane said. “I think it may come from Hollywood. Wherever it came from, he believes that the power of a person and an idea could change the outcome of something even as terrible as Armageddon. This was the greatest challenge of all… He didn’t see himself as God, but he saw himself as a heroic figure on earth” (Cannon 1991, 290). So, Reagan would try to preserve the peace, and thereby the world, through strength. No war ever started, Reagan reasoned, because a country was too strong.

Given the importance of defense spending to the Gipper, it is no surprise that the subject was a frequent one in his public appearances; the word “defense” appears in 1,629 Reagan public documents between 1981 and 1988. For sure, Reagan did not always use religious rhetoric when speaking about defense spending. On many occasions, he would instead emphasize the horror stories of a military in disrepair— the planes that could not fly, the ships that could not leave harbor, the guns that did not have ammo. He might point to a litany of statistics that illustrated how far the Soviets had pulled ahead. On other occasions, Reagan would compare his defense budgets to those put forth by John Kennedy, always noting this his were much smaller by comparison. On still other occasions, he would talk about the benefits of negotiating from a position of strength, about the importance of closing the country’s “window of vulnerability.”
And, of course, the Great Communicator had his usual assortment of lively quotes and anecdotes to rely on, just like he always did. In one, Reagan joked about a Russian general who supposedly said, “I liked the arms race better when we were the only ones in it.” In another, Reagan would quote George Washington, who once said “To be prepared for war is one of the most effective means of preserving peace.”

Still, religious rhetoric would comprise a substantial portion of Reagan’s discourse on defense spending. To begin, a large amount of Reagan’s rhetoric would serve to draw a simple contrast between the United States and the Soviet Union on spiritual grounds. It is much easier to make the case for the need to strengthen yourself for a fight when you are confronted by an evil enemy. In fact, Reagan began painting the Soviets in these shades in his very first press conference. The new president was asked by Sam Donaldson what he believed the long-term goals of Russia to be. Reagan answered, “I know of no leader of the Soviet Union since the revolution, and including the present leadership, that has not more than once repeated in the various Communist congresses they hold their determination that their goal must be the promotion of world revolution and a one-world Socialist or Communist state, whichever word you want to use. Now, as long as they do that and as long as they, at the same time, have openly and publicly declared that the only morality they recognize is what will further their cause, meaning they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat, in order to attain that, and that is moral, not immoral, and we operate on a different set of standards, I think when you do business with them, even at a detente, you keep that in mind” (Reagan 1981a). These rather intemperate remarks would cause immediate difficulties for him. The Soviet
ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, had his first official visit planned for that very day. Dobrynin would privately fume, “How is he going to do business with us? What is the purpose of all that? Why should he set such a tone for the new administration from the very beginning?” (Pemberton 1997, 159-160).

Despite the fuss, Reagan refused to retreat from this position, even when given ample opportunity to do so. For example, about a month later, Walter Cronkite asked Reagan about his press conference answer. Reagan chose to up the ante,

> Well, now, let’s recap. I am aware that what I said received a great deal of news attention, and I can’t criticize the news media for that. I said it. But the thing that seems to have been ignored- well, two things- one, I did not volunteer that statement. This was not a statement that I went in and called a press conference and said, “Here, I want to say the following.” I was asked a question. And the question was, what did I think were Soviet aims? Where did I think the Soviet Union was going? And I had made it clear to them, I said, “I don’t have to offer my opinion. They have told us where they’re going over and over again. They have told us that their goal is the Marxian philosophy of world revolution and a single, one-world Communist state and that they’re dedicated to that.”

> And then I said we’re naive if we don’t recognize in their performance of that, that they also have said that the only morality- remember their ideology is without God, without our idea of morality in the religious sense- their statement about morality is that nothing is immoral if it furthers their cause, which means they can resort to lying or stealing or cheating or even murder if it furthers their cause, and that is not immoral. Now, if we’re going to deal with them, then we have to keep that in mind when we deal with them. And I’ve noticed that with their own statements about me and their attacks on me since I answered that question that way- it is the only statement I’ve made- they have never denied the truth of what I said. (Reagan 1981b).

Hence, Reagan had actually expanded on his earlier comments by offering a causal explanation for why the Soviets lie and cheat and steal- that being because “their ideology is
without God, without our idea of morality in the religious sense.” This, of course, was a very Eisenhower-ish perspective on the nature of the difference between the two states. As we have already seen, Eisenhower saw the Cold War as a fundamentally religious conflict. By framing the nature of the tensions as such, Ike hoped to strengthen his call for aid to countries fighting the Red Menace.

Reagan clearly attempted to do the same. Reagan would regularly make the distinction between a religious “us” and an atheistic “them,” thereby hoping to make his appeals for stronger defense more persuasive. As the President explained in his speech marking Captive Nations Week in 1983: “Two visions of the world remain locked in dispute. The first believes all men are created equal by a loving God who has blessed us with freedom. Abraham Lincoln spoke for us: ‘No man,’ he said, ‘is good enough to govern another without the other’s consent.’ The second vision believes that religion is opium for the masses. It believes that eternal principles like truth, liberty, and democracy have no meaning beyond the whim of the state. And Lenin spoke for them: ‘It is true, that liberty is precious,’ he said, ‘so precious that it must be rationed.’ Well, I’ll take Lincoln’s version over Lenin’s- and so will citizens of the world if they’re given free choice” (Reagan 1983h).

Or, as Reagan said to a conference on religious liberty in 1985:

But as all of you know only too well, there are many political regimes today that completely reject the notion that a man or a woman can have a greater loyalty to God than to the state. Marx’s central insight when he was creating his political system was that religious belief would subvert his intentions. Under the Communist system, the ruling party would claim for itself the attributes which religious faith ascribes to God alone, and the state would be final arbiter of … truth, I should say, justice and morality… Marx declared religion an enemy of the people, a drug, an opiate of the masses.
And Lenin said: ‘Religion and communism are incompatible in theory as well as in practice… We must fight religion.’

All of this illustrates a truth that, I believe, must be understood. Atheism is not an incidental element of communism, not just part of the package; it is the package (Reagan 1985e).

On many occasions, Reagan would contextualize concrete foreign policy disputes as a battle between these two dichotomous perspectives on God. Reagan once described the Soviet crackdown in Poland, for example, as follows:

In an interview published here before his confinement, Lech Walesa spoke of the ‘wheat that grows on the stones,’ of how brutal repression only seems to strengthen the hope and hunger of those who long for freedom. He said about Poland’s Communist rulers, ‘Our souls contain exactly the contrary of what they wanted. They wanted us not to believe in God, and our churches are full. They wanted us to be materialistic and incapable of sacrifice; we are antimaterialistic and capable of sacrifice. They wanted us to be afraid of the tanks, of the guns, and instead we don’t fear them at all.’

In these words, I think we find the justification for the importance of the values of family, community, and religion, and some of the changes we’ve made in Washington during the last 18 months.

When I visited him last June in Rome, His Holiness Pope John Paul II spoke of his profound hope that the ‘entire structure of American life will rest ever more securely on the strong foundation of moral and spiritual values. Without the fostering and defense of these values, all human advancement is stunted, and the very dignity of the human person,’ he said, ‘is endangered.’

I would suggest to you today that nowhere in the world is there a more splendid affirmation of this connection between religious values and political freedom than in the ideals, the faith, and the heroism of the Polish people and the leaders of Solidarity (Reagan 1982f).

Essentially, Reagan posited that the entire situation in Poland was at heart a religious question. The first goal that he attributes to the Soviet leaders is that they wanted the Poles “not
to believe in God.” He quotes John Paul II as he suggests that U.S. policy is based on “the strong foundation of moral and spiritual values.” Last, Reagan claims that the Polish resistance is a “splendid affirmation of this connection between religious values and political freedom.” In many respects, these sentiments are no different than those offered in Reagan’s aforementioned Captive Nations Week address, where he proclaimed “the cause of freedom is the cause of God” (Reagan 1983h). By extension, as America supports freedom, the cause of America is also the cause of God.

Similarly, Reagan told an audience of Cuban Americans in 1983 that the “greatest tie” between Cuba and America “can be seen in the incredible number of cathedrals and churches found throughout the hemisphere.” “Our forefathers,” Reagan reminded them, “took the worship of God seriously.” But Reagan warned that the Americas were threatened by “a philosophy that holds truth and liberty in contempt and is a self-declared enemy of the worship of God.” Reagan’s point was that we, meaning regular Cubans and Americans, love God, while they, meaning the Soviets, are his enemy. The Great Communicator punctuated this vision of a battle between religion and atheism by means of some of his trademark humor: “You know, they say there are only two places where communism works: in heaven, where they don’t need it- and in hell, where they’ve already got it” (Reagan 1983f).

On multiple occasions Reagan would ruminate more extensively about the consequences that resulted from the Soviet denial of God. One instance would be his speech to the Conservative Political Action Conference dinner in March of 1981 (Reagan 1981c). It is worth quoting Reagan’s remarks at length:
And we must hold out this exciting prospect of an orderly, compassionate, pluralistic society- an archipelago of prospering communities and divergent institutions- a place where a free and energetic people can work out their own destiny under God.

I know that some will think about the perilous world we live in and the dangerous decade before us and ask what practical effect this conservative vision can have today. When Prime Minister Thatcher was here recently we both remarked on the sudden, overwhelming changes that had come recently to politics in both our countries.

At our last official function, I told the Prime Minister that everywhere we look in the world the cult of the state is dying. And I held out hope that it wouldn’t be long before those of our adversaries who preach the supremacy of the state were remembered only for their role in a sad, rather bizarre chapter in human history. The largest planned economy in the world has to buy food elsewhere or its people would starve.

We’ve heard in our century far too much of the sounds of anguish from those who live under totalitarian rule. We’ve seen too many monuments made not out of marble or stone but out of barbed wire and terror. But from these terrible places have come survivors, witnesses to the triumph of the human spirit over the mystique of state power, prisoners whose spiritual values made them the rulers of their guards. With their survival, they brought us “the secret of the camps,” a lesson for our time and for any age: Evil is powerless if the good are unafraid.

That’s why the Marxist vision of man without God must eventually be seen as an empty and a false faith- the second oldest in the world- first proclaimed in the Garden of Eden with whispered words of temptation: “Ye shall be as gods.” The crisis of the Western world, Whittaker Chambers reminded us, exists to the degree in which it is indifferent to God. “The Western world does not know it,” he said about our struggle, “but it already possesses the answer to this problem- but only provided that its faith in God and the freedom He enjoins is as great as communism’s faith in man.”

This is the real task before us: to reassert our commitment as a nation to a law higher than our own, to renew our spiritual strength. Only by building a wall of such spiritual resolve can we, as a free people, hope to protect our own heritage and make it someday the birthright of all men.

Reagan does a couple of interesting things in these paragraphs. For one, he articulates his
view that the faith of the West will be the ultimate reason why it will triumph in the Cold War. The men and women who escaped the gulags were able to do so, Reagan submits, because of their “spiritual values,” values which “made them rulers of their guards.” Similarly, Reagan quotes Whittaker Chambers to argue that the “answer” to the Communist problem is already available—“faith in God and the freedom He enjoins.” Finally, Reagan concludes by claiming that it is necessary for the country to “renew” its “spiritual strength.” Only by being strong in faith could the U.S. hope to prevail.

As a second observation, Reagan also makes a notable reference to Genesis 3:5, “Ye shall be as gods.” The line is taken from the chapter where the serpent tempts Eve to eat from the tree in the middle of the Garden, against God’s wishes, by promising that if she does she will become like God himself, powerful and wise. The way Reagan uses this quote serves to link the “Marxist vision” to the serpent. Both offer nothing more than a “false faith.”

Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan argues that Reagan spoke in this manner because he felt it was imperative to tell the “truth” about the Soviets. Reagan believed that past U.S. administrations had been overly diplomatic out of fear that they might offend the Communist leadership. Reagan, on the other hand, thought his moralistic rhetoric was “uniquely constructive.” People had to know what they were up against (Noonan 2001, 200-201). As Ed Meese (1992, 164) put it, Reagan’s anti-Soviet rhetoric was part of the “essence” of his Cold War strategy, it was part of his “game plan.” Hence, we should not make the mistake of thinking that there was no purpose behind these words.

The Whittaker Chambers quote that appears in excerpt above, as it turns out, is of special
importance. Whittaker Chambers had first become attracted to Communist ideas as a student at Columbia University in the 1920s. He would serve as a Communist spy against his country before later renouncing his youthful radicalism. Chambers only emerged as a national figure in 1948 when, as an editor at *Time* magazine, he publicly identified Alger Hiss as a member of his old underground operation. A prominent New Dealer, Hiss had worked in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, the Department of Justice and the State Department. He was an adviser to Roosevelt at Yalta and was chief advisor to the U.S. delegation at the first UN General Assembly meeting.

Hiss fervently denied having spied for the Soviets in testimony before the House Un-American Affairs Committee and its star Congressman, a young Richard Nixon. In fact, Hiss denied ever having met Chambers, though he later was forced to recant and acknowledge past dealings with Chambers under an alias, George Crosley. Hiss’ trial for perjury (the statute of limitations on espionage charges had already expired) was one of the many “trials of the century,” and it became an early Cold War litmus test for both sides. The investigation was a public spectacle, with Chambers notoriously leading FBI agents to his Maryland farm where he had hidden covert material in a hollowed-out pumpkin. Hiss’ opponents saw him as a representative of a disloyal element within U.S. society. Hiss’ defenders believed that he instead was a victim of right wing paranoia. In the end, Hiss was convicted and sentenced to five years in jail and, as it happens, there appears to be an emerging consensus that Hiss had been a spy after all, certainly more so after the release of a series of NSA declassified intercepts in the mid-1990s.
Regardless of Hiss’ ultimate guilt or innocence, the case left a great impression on Reagan. As President, Reagan awarded Chambers a posthumous Medal of Freedom in 1984. In 1988, his Administration declared the farm where the “pumpkin papers” were found a national historic landmark. More to the point, Reagan would repeatedly draw from Chambers’ life as part of his rhetorical campaign to delegitimize the Soviets due to their hostility towards organized religion. Reagan told one specific anecdote involving Chambers quite commonly. It was borrowed from Chambers’ biography *Witness*, a book that traces the author’s growing disillusionment with, and ultimate abandonment of, Communist ideology. As Reagan told it, the breaking point for Chambers came when he gazed upon the ear of his infant daughter and suddenly realized, as the President said to the graduates of his alma mater Eureka College in 1984, “that such intricacy, such precision could be no accident, no freak of nature” (Reagan 1984a; see also Reagan 1982b, 1983c, 1984b). His daughter, Chambers realized, had to be the work of God. “Chambers’ story,” Reagan continued to explain, “represents a generation’s disenchantment with statism and its return to eternal truths and fundamental values.”

Erickson (1985, 80-82) offers a cogent interpretation of Reagan’s use of Chambers as a “symbolic character.” He argues that Chambers was employed by Reagan as a living allegory, an allegory that attested to the victory of Christianity over Communism. In other parts of *Witness* Chambers recalled how he had nearly been persuaded to abort his daughter. But, as he considered this option, Chambers experienced a rebirth, a rebirth that is shared in the story of his child’s ear. The story is therefore at its heart about the triumph of faith in God over faith in the state, and therein lies its principal relevance. Again, the point of the tale is to emphasize the fact
that the primary difference between the United States and the Soviet Union is a religious one.

The Chambers story is in many ways about a personal conflict between religion and atheism. It is thus a more subtle rhetorical technique than some of the examples that have already been discussed. Reagan was capable of this kind of nuance as well. One need only to look to his frequent use of the word “crusade” when referring to his foreign policy. To an Ohio veteran’s organization, Reagan said, “As we’ve rebuilt America’s military and strategic strength, we’ve also adopted a foreign policy that speaks openly and candidly about the failures of totalitarianism, that advocates the moral superiority of Western ideals like personal freedom and representative government- a foreign policy that calls for a global crusade for personal freedom and representative government” (Reagan 1982g). Or, as he said to the Heritage Foundation, “Our call was for a forward strategy for freedom, a crusade to promote and foster democratic values throughout the world” (Reagan 1986a). Or as Reagan concluded his extremely significant 1982 address to the British parliament, “Let us now begin a major effort to secure the best- a crusade for freedom that will engage the faith and fortitude of the next generation. For the sake of peace and justice, let us move toward a world in which all people are at last free to determine their own destiny” (Reagan 1982d). The truth is it is not at all hard to find examples like these three; the word “crusade” appears in 111 Reagan public documents between 1981 and 1988. By comparison, “crusade” appears in just 22 Carter public documents.

Categorizing a foreign policy as a crusade is a very significant choice with substantial religious implications. The Crusades were a serious of religious wars launched mainly by Christians against Muslims (though, by the time of the Fourth Crusades, the Christians would be
fighting each other). The origin of the word “crusade” derives from the Latin *crux* for cross. By calling his foreign policy a crusade, Reagan implied that it had the dimensions of a holy war, that the U.S. was bearing the cross against an infidel.

In all of these ways then - the lengthy disquisitions on the consequences of the lack of Soviet religion, the contextualization of foreign affairs crises as religious disputes, the repeated tellings of the Chambers anecdote, the use of terms like “crusade” - did Reagan seek to contrast the U.S. with the Soviets on spiritual grounds. This made it much easier for him to later call for defense spending. The Cold War *was* a religious conflict, after all.

Still, Reagan would use much more specifically targeted religious rhetoric to mobilize support for defense spending. He would often cite different Biblical passages as part of his appeals. One such example can be found in the President’s address to the Bundestag during a visit to Germany in the summer of 1982.

> We also seek peace among nations. The Psalmist said, “Seek peace and pursue it.” Well, our foreign policies are based on this principle and directed toward this end. The noblest objective of our diplomacy is the patient and difficult task of reconciling our adversaries to peace. And I know we all look forward to the day when the only industry of war will be the research of historians.

But the simple hope for peace is not enough. We must remember something that Friedrich Schiller said: “The most pious man can’t stay in peace if it doesn’t please his evil neighbor.” So, there must be a method to our search, a method that recognizes the dangers and realities of the world…

> We cannot simply assume every nation wants the peace that we so earnestly desire. The Polish people would tell us there are those who would use military force to repress others who want only basic human rights. The freedom fighters of Afghanistan would tell us as well that the threat of aggression has not receded from the world.
Without a strengthened Atlantic security, the possibility of military coercion will be very great. We must continue to improve our defenses if we’re to preserve peace and freedom. (Reagan 1982e)

The Psalm that Reagan refers to is number 34. The full verse is “Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it” (Ps 34: 14). The additional quote by Schiller was especially well chosen given the audience; Schiller was a famous German poet and playwright who is still considered one of the true luminaries of German literature.

Reagan’s point here is very easy to see. The Bible tells readers to seek peace. But, because other countries do not naturally want peace, the West can only meet that dictate if it buttresses its defenses. Therefore, spending on defense really is a way of following the Bible.

Further, in the Schiller quote, Reagan adds another religious dimension to the speech well in keeping with the kind of rhetoric he typically used to describe the Soviets. “The most pious man can’t stay in peace if it doesn’t please his evil neighbor.” It is more than obvious that, in this statement, the West is the “pious man” and the Soviets are the “evil neighbor.”

Reagan would use another Psalm as part of a call for greater defense spending in some brief remarks he made before the Young Leadership Conference of the United Jewish Appeal in 1984. On this occasion, Reagan said, “Since taking office, our administration has made significant headway in rebuilding our defenses and making America more secure. Perhaps you remember the 29th Psalm in which King David said, “The Lord will give strength to His people; the Lord will bless His people with peace.” Well, today America once again recognizes that peace and strength are inseparable. But we’ve only begun to repair past damage. Make no mistake: If we heed those who would cripple America’s rebuilding program, we will undermine
our own security and the security of our closest friends, like Israel, and I am not prepared to let that happen” (Reagan 1984c). The essential thrust of Reagan’s argument is much the same as the previous example.

Before a meeting of religious broadcasters the next year, Reagan would make an even stronger Scriptural argument for defense spending: “We mean to maintain a strong defense, because only with a strong defense can we preserve the peace we cherish. And I found myself wanting to remind you of what Jesus said in Luke 14: 31: ‘Oh, what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle will not first sit down and take counsel whether he is strong enough with 10,000 men to encounter the one coming against him with 20,000. Or else, while the other is still far away, sends a delegation and asks the terms of peace.’ I don’t think the Lord that blessed this country, as no other country has ever been blessed, intends for us to have to someday negotiate because of our weakness” (Reagan 1985b).

Reagan unquestionably either misinterpreted these verses or intentionally misused them (Briggs 1985). On the face of it even, it seems unlikely that the “Prince of Peace” of discussing military strategy. Which, of course, he was not. Rather, like so many other of his teachings, Jesus was making use of a parable. The explicit point of the parable is revealed in the final line of the passage, a line Reagan conveniently left out, “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions” (Lk 14: 33). Jesus was therefore warning the large crowds that were beginning to follow him that they should be aware of the “cost” of doing so (Lk 14: 28). Jesus was asking the people to determine for themselves whether they could pay that cost, whether they had the strength necessary to make the sacrifices he was asking of them.
He was not giving guidance about foreign policy.

This reference to Luke before an audience of religious broadcasters may be unsurprising to some. But Reagan had actually used the same exact passage earlier that morning in a budget speech he gave to a very secular audience of business and trade representatives (Reagan 1985a). In front of these men and women, Reagan had said:

The defense of our nation is the one budget item which cannot be dictated by domestic considerations. Despite severe constraints on our budget, we must respond to the unprecedented military buildup of the Soviet Union, the largest military buildup in world history. Unfortunately, we had to start from a weakened position, brought on by long years of neglect and underfunding, and we still have a ways to go.

You might be interested to know that the Scriptures are on our side in this- Luke 14:31, in which Jesus in talking to the disciples spoke about a king who might be contemplating going to war against another king, with his 10,000 men. But he sits down and counsels how good he’s going to do against the other fellow’s 20,000 and then says he may have to send a delegation to talk peace terms. Well, I don’t think we ever want to be in a position of only being half as strong and having to send a delegation to negotiate under those circumstances- peace terms- with the Soviet Union. So, ultimately, our security and our hopes for success at the arms reduction talks hinge on the determination that we show here to continue our program to rebuild and refortify our defenses.

Hence, we should not make the mistake of thinking that Reagan limited his use of the Bible to sectarian gatherings. In fact, in a national radio address on his missile defense program in 1985, Reagan would once again quote from Luke in drawing a connection between peace and strength. Reagan observed, “It’s better to protect lives than to avenge them. But another reason, equally simple and compelling, persuades us to its merit. As the Book of Luke says: ‘If a strong man shall keep his court well guarded, he shall live in peace’” (Reagan 1985f).

The quote comes from Luke 11: 21. In the lines that precede it, Jesus casts out a demon
from a possessed man. The point about keeping one’s “court well guarded” harkens back to this event. Jesus was explaining how an initial conversion was not enough. Discipleship requires perseverance. Otherwise, that demon may return, “and the last state of that person is worse than the first” (Lk 11: 26; see also Gonzalez 2010, 147-148). Hence, Reagan misused this Biblical passage, too. Like before, Luke 11: 21 was a metaphor, not a literal statement of fact.

These rhetorical choices were the most controversial ones that Reagan would make. A number of theologians loudly criticized Reagan’s application of Scripture (Briggs 1985). The Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, a prominent and respected Christian intellectual, excoriated Reagan, saying, “I think the President would be well-advised to make the argument for his military budget and strategies on the basis of public reasoning rather than invoking dubious biblical authority.” Dr. David Adams, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, seconded Neuhaus: “When the President cites this verse as a prop for Administration policy, he misuses the Bible. It is not an answer book but a record of faith.” Underscoring that point, others pointed to alternative Biblical passages that offered a contradictory message. At a hearing of the Senate Budget Committee, Sen. Charles Grassley (R-IA) read other lines from Luke focusing on questions of cost (Los Angeles Times 1985). In a letter to the Washington Post, Fania Fleissig directed the President’s attention to Matthew 5: 44 and its demand to “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Washington Post 1985). Political commentators piled on. Critical pieces on Reagan’s Biblical lessons appeared from Garry Wills (1985) and Colman McCarthy (1985), among others.

Eventually, Reagan would be forced to publicly defend his use of the Bible. At a press
conference at the end of February 1985, a reporter asked the President if he thought “it’s appropriate to use the Bible in defending a political argument?” Reagan answered, “Well, I don’t think I’ve ever used the Bible to further political ends or not, but I’ve found that the Bible contains an answer to just about everything and every problem that confronts us, and I wonder sometimes why we don’t recognize that one book could solve a lot of problems for us” (Reagan 1985c). It is hard not to conclude that Reagan was being slightly disingenuous with this response.

In addition to his citation of Scripture, another way in which Reagan used religious rhetoric to supplement his call for higher budgets was by describing defense spending in more general terms that nonetheless still have a high spiritual content. Defense spending, according to the President, was “moral.” Not spending enough for defense was “immoral” or “wrong,” even “unforgivable.” Generous defense funding would serve a “sacred” purpose. The central goal of an adequate defense was to protect the “blessings” the country had already received. And so on. The number of instances where Reagan used such phrasings is too numerous too fully count. The reader should treat what follows as a mere selection of the kinds of claims Reagan was prone to making, with emphasis added:

Now, the defense budgets over the next several years will be especially important. Studies indicate that our relative military imbalance with the Soviet Union will be- believe it or not- at its worst by the mideighties. As President, I can’t close my eyes, cross my fingers, and simply hope that the Soviets will behave themselves. Today a major conflict involving the United States could occur without adequate time to upgrade U.S. force readiness. It’s morally important that we take steps to protect America’s safety and preserve the peace. (Reagan 1982a)

Now, some would have us get at the deficit by reducing defense spending…
Every penny we spend is for one **sacred purpose**: to prevent that first shot from being fired, to prevent young Americans from dying in battle. Let us ask those who say we’re spending too much: “How much would it have been worth to you to avoid World War II? Who would put a price on the lives that were lost on Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Omaha Beach, Anzio, or Bastogne?” For the sake of our children and their children, I consider it my duty, indeed all of our duties as citizens, to make sure that America is strong enough to remain free and at peace. (Reagan 1982c)

I have lived through two world wars. I saw the American people rise to meet these crises, and I have faith in their willingness to come to their nation’s defense in the future. But it’s far better to prevent a crisis than to have to face it unprepared at the last moment. That’s why we have an **overriding moral obligation** to invest now, this year, in the budget, in restoring America’s strength to keep the peace and preserve our freedom. (Reagan 1983a)

The other essential precondition of a strengthened and purposeful foreign policy was the rebuilding of our foundation of our military strength. “To be prepared for war,” George Washington said, “is... the most effectual means of preserving peace.” Well, it’s precisely because we’re committed to peace that we have a **moral obligation** to ensure America’s defense credibility. (Reagan 1983b)

Nor must we gamble, ever again, with the security of this country by neglecting our defense readiness. The day I took office, our Armed Forces were in a shocking state of neglect... I believe it’s **immoral** to ask the sons and daughters of America to protect this land with second-rate equipment and bargain basement weapons. (Reagan 1983d)

Let me interject here to say there’s one area where the Federal Government has clearly neglected its responsibility, and that is in national defense. The debate on defense is about more than dollars and deficits and rooting out waste, as important as they are. The central issue is about protecting human lives and preserving freedom and democracy, **because they’re the source of all our other blessings**. I believe what occurred in the last decade when the Soviets raced ahead militarily and we stood still was dreadfully wrong. I believe it is **not just immoral but unforgivable** to ask the sons and daughters of America to protect this country with aging equipment and bargain basement weapons. We can only keep our families safe and our country at peace when the enemies of democracy know that America has the courage to stay strong. And we intend to see that they know that.
You and I both know that this debate on defense is about more than deficits and rooting out waste, as important as they are. It’s about protecting lives and preserving freedom, because that’s the source of all our other blessings. What occurred during the last decade when the Soviets raced ahead militarily while we stood still was dreadfully wrong. We believe it’s immoral to ask the sons and daughters of America to protect this land with second-rate equipment and weapons that won’t work. (Reagan 1983g)

The debate on defense is about protecting lives and preserving freedom, because they’re the source of all our other blessings. We both believe it’s immoral to ask the sons and daughters of America to protect this land with second-rate equipment and weapons that won’t work. (Reagan 1983i)

Ours is the pursuit of a stable and enduring peace, but at the same time, it would have been indefensible and immoral to allow the deterrent posture we need to protect the peace to continue deteriorating as it was. (Reagan 1984d)

First, we must complete the task of military modernization and improved readiness. This is directly related to the prospect for arms reductions. In the past, we’ve succeeded best when we’ve bargained from strength. We have a moral obligation to pursue technological breakthroughs that could permit us to move away from exclusive reliance on the threat of retaliation and mutual nuclear terror. (Reagan 1984e)

One of the most sacred duties of any President is keeping America secure and at peace. And peace and security are not free commodities; they’re precious, and like everything of great value, there’s a price to pay. (Reagan 1985d)

You know, sometimes I’d like to take some of those people in Washington who are always trying to cut defense spending and bring them here to Parris Island- or to Fort Jackson, Orlando, or Lackland. And I’d tell them these are the soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines who are putting their lives on the line to keep America free. And if we ever must send our young service people into harm’s way, then it is our moral duty to give them absolutely the best equipment and support that America can muster. (Reagan 1986b)

What this collection of quotes should prove is that Reagan was, indeed, quite likely to
frame defense spending with the aid of a religiously charged vocabulary. As one can see, often Reagan did so by calling to mind the image of America’s soldiers and sailors. It was to them that America had a moral obligation, Reagan claimed.

Bible quotes and these quick moral ripostes aside, at times Reagan would launch into much more extensive and thoughtful disquisitions on the connections between Soviet iniquity and the preeminent importance of a strong defense. The most famous (or infamous, depending on your view) example of such a discussion was certainly Reagan’s “Evil Empire” speech to the annual convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida on March 8, 1983 (Reagan 1983c). The speech was seen by many as the “keynote” of Reagan’s push to get Congress to approve a 10% real increase in defense spending (Smith 1983). And in many ways this speech brought together all the rhetorical themes we have been following in this chapter.

Though Reagan’s address would become known as an extremely harsh speech, the President actually used a very soft open. He began with some of his trademark humor, telling a joke about a minister and a politician who arrived in Heaven at the same time. St. Peter directs the two to their quarters, with the minister being placed in a small single room while the politician receives a mansion. The politician cannot understand why he is better accommodated than the holy man. But, St. Peter says, “You have to understand how things are up here. We’ve got thousands and thousands of clergy. You’re the first politician who ever made it.”

After this amusing opening, Reagan turned to the subject of his remarks. He noted that the U.S. democracy was founded on the principle that “freedom prospers only where the blessings of God are avidly sought and humbly accepted.” Because he and the evangelicals in
attendance accepted this insight, Reagan said, they were “in opposition to, or at least out of step with, a prevailing attitude of many who have turned to a modern-day secularism, discarding the tried and time-tested values upon which our very civilization is based.” Reagan proceeded to discuss the dangers of secularism, pointing to abortion politics (“Is all of Judeo-Christian tradition wrong? Are we to believe that something so sacred can be looked upon as a purely physical thing…”) and school prayer.

The last half of the address was all about foreign affairs. First, Reagan drew the usual contrast between the U.S. and the Soviets on religious grounds. The President told his listeners “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.” That sin and evil, obviously, was mostly due to the pernicious influence of the Soviets. Reagan, recalling his first press conference, said, “I think I should point out I was only quoting Lenin, their guiding spirit, who said in 1920 that they repudiate all morality that proceeds from supernatural ideas-that’s their name for religion- or ideas that are outside class conceptions. Morality is entirely subordinate to the interests of class war. And everything is moral that is necessary for the annihilation of the old, exploiting social order and for uniting the proletariat.”

Given those motivations, Reagan criticized those who would advocate for something like a nuclear freeze. A freeze could only offer the “illusion” of peace. Instead, Reagan made a plea for continuing to rebuild America’s forces:

Yes, let us pray for the salvation of all of those who live in that totalitarian darkness- pray they will discover the joy of knowing God. But until they do, let us be aware that while they preach the supremacy of the state, declare its omnipotence over individual man, and predict its eventual
domination of all peoples on the Earth, they are the focus of evil in the modern world.

It was C. S. Lewis who, in his unforgettable “Screwtape Letters,” wrote: “The greatest evil is not done now in those sordid ‘dens of crime’ that Dickens loved to paint. It is not even done in concentration camps and labor camps. In those we see its final result. But it is conceived and ordered (moved, seconded, carried and minuted) in clear, carpeted, warmed, and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voice.”

Well, because these “quiet men” do not “raise their voices,” because they sometimes speak in soothing tones of brotherhood and peace, because, like other dictators before them, they’re always making “their final territorial demand,” some would have us accept them at their word and accommodate ourselves to their aggressive impulses. But if history teaches anything, it teaches that simple-minded appeasement or wishful thinking about our adversaries is folly. It means the betrayal of our past, the squandering of our freedom.

So, I urge you to speak out against those who would place the United States in a position of military and moral inferiority. You know, I’ve always believed that old Screwtape reserved his best efforts for those of you in the church. So, in your discussions of the nuclear freeze proposals, I urge you to beware the temptation of pride- the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil.

In no other speech does Reagan so explicitly link his rhetorical themes of religion vs. atheism and the moral necessity of defense spending. It is very clear from the excerpt that spending is necessary because the Soviets do not acknowledge God. “Until they do,” they will continue to remain “the focus of evil in the modern world.” Anyone who fails to support steeling the country against the “aggressive impulses of an evil empire” risks putting the US in a position of both “military and moral inferiority.” Spending has to be supported, the freeze must be
opposed, because, at heart, Reagan argues, the arms race is a “struggle between right and wrong and good and evil”—characteristics that he has made clear ultimately derive from the Soviet Union’s underlying atheism.

Even the slightest aspects of these lines can be tied back to this overriding conclusion. For instance, Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*, which Reagan quotes when discussing the Soviet leadership, was written from the perspective Screwtape, a senior demon, who is attempting to instruct his nephew, Wormwood, in the methods of leading Christians astray. It is not very hard to guess which country is taking on the role of Screwtape in this address.

In Erickson’s (1985, 76) words “the speech triggered an international uproar by translating domestic and foreign policy debates into an apocalyptic Christian parable.” Anthony Lewis (1983) eviscerated Reagan for it. Lewis argued that “If there is anything that should be illegitimate in the American system it is such use of sectarian religiosity to sell a political program.” He alternately called Reagan’s language “outrageous,” “primitive,” “crude” and “dangerous.” “When a politician claims that God favors his programs,” Lewis warned, “alarm bells should ring.” The *Chicago Tribune* (1983) agreed. “For all its vigor and truculence, the President’s fire-and-brimstone speech to the National Association of Evangelicals last week is the kind of shouting that disturbs many Americans. It is not that what he said was false, but that it was exaggerated and was delivered in language poised near the edge of frenzy.” Ernest Conine (1983) expressed similar opinions in a piece appearing in the *Los Angeles Times*. Although he agreed with Reagan’s analysis of Soviet intentions, Conine pointed out that “Presidents, unlike priests and preachers, can’t afford the luxury of unrestrained truth-speaking.”
Conine worried that Reagan still did not understand that his words resonate both at home and abroad and that such “confrontationist rhetoric is more likely to frighten friends than to bring about better behavior by the Kremlin.” He called the whole speech “a mistake” and a “blunder.” Other critical reactions were published in outlets ranging from *Time* to *Sojourners* to the Soviet press (Smith 2006, 353-354). Even some of Reagan’s own aides were concerned about the President’s choice of words. David Gergen recalled working hard to tone down earlier drafts but it was Reagan himself who inserted most of the most objectionable content (Cannon 1991, 317).

The close reader will notice that the majority of these citations, including the Evil Empire speech are clustered in late 1982 and early 1983. If this thesis is correct, this observation should not surprise us. Previous cases have shown (and future cases will continue to show) that presidents are most likely to embrace religious rhetoric in unfavorable, “crisis” type circumstances. So it was, too, for Reagan. This period, between 1982 and 1983, was one of the two low points of the Reagan presidency, the other being the aftermath of the Iran-Contra scandal. Beginning in August 1981, the U.S. slipped into a massive recession. Unemployment would peak in January 1983, with about 11.5 million people looking for work. The unemployment rate, averaging 9.7% in 1982, was the highest rate since the Depression. As a byproduct of the downturn, the country’s deficit soared. With no other options, Reagan would be forced to accept a series of revenue generating tax hikes in the Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act (TEFRA). The President preserved the individual reductions he had achieved in 1981 but his compromise on taxes was bitterly resented by some of his supporters. Some insiders, like Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Paul Craig Roberts, quit in protest.
Accordingly, Reagan’s popularity dissipated. He fell to just above 40% approval at the end of 1982. His party suffered heavy losses in the 1982 midterm elections as the Democrats picked up twenty-six House seats. There was open speculation that either Reagan would not run for re-election or, were he to run, that he would be a one-term failure. Given all these troubles, it is unsurprising that this period witnessed a major address on defense spending that Reagan wrapped with a religious flourish.

Reagan addressed the nation on his defense policies on November 22, 1982 (Reagan 1982h). Much of the talk was standard to Reagan. He had his charts showing how the Soviets had raced ahead of the U.S. in terms of military spending, how they had accumulated more ICBMs and bombers. He made reference to the state of disrepair he had found the U.S. forces in upon taking office. He compared his budgets to Kennedy’s, and so on. “Some may question what modernizing our military has to do with peace,” Reagan admitted. He answered, “Well, as I explained earlier, a secure force keeps others from threatening us, and that keeps the peace.”

The connection between a modern military and peace was the basis for his religious conclusion. Like several other presidents, including Johnson and George H.W. Bush, Reagan chose to capitalize on an upcoming holiday, Thanksgiving, that has some inherent religious significance.

I began these remarks speaking of our children. I want to close on the same theme. Our children should not grow up frightened. They should not fear the future. We’re working to make it peaceful and free. I believe their future can be the brightest, most exciting of any generation. We must reassure them and let them know that their parents and the leaders of this world are seeking, above all else, to keep them safe and at peace. I consider this to be a sacred trust.
My fellow Americans, on this Thanksgiving when we have so much to be grateful for, let us give special thanks for our peace, our freedom, and our good people.

I’ve always believed that this land was set aside in an uncommon way, that a divine plan placed this great continent between the oceans to be found by a people from every corner of the Earth who had a special love of faith, freedom, and peace.

Let us reaffirm America’s destiny of goodness and good will. Let us work for peace and, as we do, let us remember the lines of the famous old hymn: “O God of Love, O King of Peace, make wars throughout the world to cease.”

Thank you. Good night, and God bless you.

Collectively, it is now possible to identify the main contours of Reagan’s religious rhetoric on defense. First, Reagan tried to make people aware that the Cold War was more or less a struggle between God and the Godless. He certainly said as much explicitly, but he also advanced this point in more subtle ways, like his frequent re-telling of the Whittaker Chambers’ conversion story. Second, Reagan would from time to time refer to the Bible as a source that supported military preparedness. He did not hesitate to claim that “Scriptures are on our side in this.” He argued that surely it was not the case that “the Lord… blessed this country… for us to have to someday negotiate because of our weakness.” His Biblical interpretations were not always defensible. Third, Reagan would employ strong moral and religious adjectives in order to describe the purposes of his defense budgets. And, finally, on certain dates, he would draw all of these trends together as part of larger explorations of U.S. policy, i.e. the “evil empire” speech. This final speech offers evidence of all three themes. It includes an implicit contrast between a religious U.S. and an atheistic Soviet Union (“I’ve always believed that this land was
set aside in an uncommon way, that a divine plan placed this great continent between the oceans…). It contains a quotation from a religious text (here, an old hymn). Last, it includes a forceful moral phrase used to describe the purposes of Reagan’s policy (“sacred trust”).

Most people would likely suspect that Reagan’s religious rhetoric was beneficial to him. After all, he did succeed in improving the status of America’s defenses. But, as we shall see, the record does not seem to lend itself to such an interpretation.

Reagan had almost no success persuading the public to support his cause of higher defense spending. Charts 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3 are extremely illuminating in this case. Each tracks the preference of the American public for either increases or decreases in defense spending. The data was collected by three different organizations, Gallup, CBS/New York Times and NORC/Roper, using three different questions, yet each displays the exact same pattern. First,
there was a dramatic increase in support for greater defense spending in 1979 and 1980. In the Gallup poll, 27% of Americans said the country was spending “too little” on national defense in July of 1977. By the end of January 1980, that figure had soared to 49%. In January of 1981, fully 61% of respondents told CBS/New York Times pollsters that they thought spending on defense should be “increased.”

This trend is an entirely rational and predictable response to world developments. In events also described in chapter four, Iranian revolutionaries overran the U.S. embassy in Tehran in November of 1979. A large group of Americans were taken hostage and would remain captive for well over a year, despite President Carter’s constant efforts to negotiate their release. The low point of this embarrassing episode was the disastrous failure of a rescue mission.
launched in April of 1980. The mission involved a complicated plan where eight helicopters would covertly fly into Iran. The teams would then take unmarked trucks into the city, storm the embassy and rush the hostages to transport planes that would be waiting at a nearby abandoned airstrip. The plan went awry from the start as a dust storm and hydraulic problems disabled three of the choppers, forcing military planners to abort the operation at the first staging area. But, before the forces could turn back, one of the helicopters crashed into a cargo plane, triggering a massive explosion that killed eight soldiers. The smoldering wreckage was broadcast worldwide as a symbol of American ineptitude.

On top of all of this, on Christmas 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Today,
this event is seen as the beginning of the end for the U.S.S.R., as a desperate move made by a crumbling power. But, at the time, the general consensus was that the invasion was proof of the threat of Soviet power and militarism. Dating from the fall of Vietnam until the invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviet Empire had absorbed ten different countries, averaging one every six months. It was a startling rate of expansionism that had commentators writing about an “America in retreat” by mid-1979 (Busch 1997, 451). So, it makes great sense that the public would be supportive of higher defense spending given these international conditions.

The high level of support for defense spending continued throughout Reagan’s first year, which culminated in the President winning substantial outlays for the military (see below). However, by 1982 public opinion had dramatically reversed- a fact that is readily visible in all three graphs. In the Gallup poll, for the last seven years of the Reagan Administration around 45% of the public generally felt “too much” was being spent on defense versus the roughly 15% who thought the country was spending “too little.” The numbers provided by the NORC/Roper organizations are almost the same.

Again, it is easy to understand the change. In 1982 much greater attention began to be paid to the federal deficit. Plus, improvements in relations with the Soviets during Reagan’s second term seemed to diminish the need for robust military spending. The conclusion is obvious: Reagan’s religious rhetoric had no impact on the public’s opinion on defense spending. Support for higher spending rose before he took office and it fell at almost the same time (1982-83) that we see the highest concentration of religious statements.

Further support for this conclusion is found in the public’s reaction to Reagan’s major
address on November 22, 1982. Reagan’s approval on November 19 was 43%. By the next reading, on December 10, Reagan was down two points to 41% (Ragsdale 2009, 238).

Earlier in this chapter we encountered scattered evidence that suggests Reagan’s religious rhetoric was often poorly received by the media. This includes his Scripture quotes as well as his “Evil Empire” address. The pattern finds even more support, however, in the response greeting Reagan’s major defense speech on November 22. Table 6.1 catalogues the opinion pieces on Reagan’s defense policies printed in the four major newspapers the week following his TV appearance. The reaction was unambiguously negative. The average column was scored just a 1.81 and 12 of the 16 pieces received negative scores of either 1 or 2.

The focus of the opposition centered on Reagan’s specific proposal for the MX missile, a key part of the larger message. There will be more to say on this weapon shortly but suffice it to say that Reagan’s media critics were skeptical of the need for the missile, dubious of the President’s plans for basing it, worried that it would abrogate the pre-existing SALT treaty and concerned that it would increase the chances of a nuclear exchange. Most of the press agreed with Louis Rene Beres (1982) who called the MX the “M-Hex” in the New York Times.

Another point of contention focused on Reagan’s analysis of the state of the U.S. military. Some felt Reagan was misleading the country into thinking the U.S. was less prepared than it actually was. The Los Angeles Times (1982) wrote in a staff editorial that “the facts that underlie the charts hardly bear out Reagan’s suggestion that the United States is now second best in most areas of military weaponry.” The paper worried that the Soviets might come to believe what Reagan said, however, and therefore “be tempted to take dangerous gambles that they
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<td>Los Angeles Times</td>
<td>William Schneider</td>
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Dates: 11/23 – 11/29

Average Score: 1.81

Positive Articles: 2 (12.5%)

Negative Articles: 12 (75.0%)

Mixed/Neutral Articles: 2 (12.5%)
would otherwise avoid.” The board called for Reagan to stop “scaring Congress and the American people with… only part of the truth about the U.S.-Soviet military balance.” In a similar op-ed appearing in the *Washington Post*, Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy (1982) wrote that Reagan was painting a “caricature” of U.S. readiness. The Senator continued, “By distorting reality to make a case of basing the MX in Dense Pack, the president is doing a serious disservice to the American public. He is making us appear weak when we are immensely strong. He is making the Soviets look superior, when in fact, there is overall nuclear balance.”

A third objection to Reagan’s speech revolved around the implications his defense spending had for the deficit. Germond and Witcover (1982) took Reagan to task for ignoring the meaning of the recent midterm elections, which, according to their interpretation, signaled that the voters expected substantial deficit reduction as a means of improving the long-term prospects of the American economy. Instead, the two men felt Reagan intended “to do business as usual and follow a defense spending program without any recognition of political reality.” “It won’t wash,” they concluded. Likewise, Stephen Chapman (1982) argued that defense cuts were both inevitable and necessary. He pointed out a number of programs, such as the MX, that he would cancel immediately and he made the case that these reductions, if done right, would ensure “that we can not only defend ourselves but also that we have an economy left to defend.”

Finally, Reagan did catch flack for his rhetorical choices, too. Ellen Goodman (1982), for one, took issue with an important element of Reagan’s main stream of religious argumentation, that being that defense spending served the sacred cause of peace. As she perceptively noted, by speaking this way Reagan was trying to “justify the military position as
being morally correct.” But for Goodman this was all too much. She felt Reagan’s language was downright Orwellian, and proclaimed him the “winner, hands down” of the “1982 George Orwell War-Is-Peace Sweepstakes.”

In sum, Reagan’s 1982 address on national security, an address that contained a very strong religious argument in its final paragraphs, was met with the same reception that welcomed his other usages of religious rhetoric—his ideas were ridiculed and his language itself offended.

Lastly, in Congress, Reagan’s defense budgets, with the exception of his very first one, also generally faced tough sledding. In 1981, the new Commander-in-Chief quickly proposed a substantial increase over Carter’s last defense budget. Reagan initially added $25.8 billion to Carter’s fiscal 1982 request, while projecting future increases of about 7% annually (in contrast, Carter had planned for around 5% annual increases). Reagan asked for more money to buy planes, missiles, tanks, ships and communications equipment but, for all his talk, in just about every case Reagan was only accelerating the development of projects that Carter had, in theory, already committed to. Perhaps this fact helps to explain why there was little opposition to Reagan on the issue. Even as new data pointed to a worsening deficit, forcing Reagan to announce on September 11 that he was voluntarily cutting his own fiscal 1982 request by $2 billion, Reagan was able to successfully resist any efforts to trim his proposals. In the end, despite opposition from a number of GOP senators, Congress more or less approved Reagan’s revised request.

The situation began to change the following year. With the economy faltering, and with Reagan demanding austerity in domestic spending as a result, the President was on the defense
about defense from the start. This time, Reagan would not be able to forestall the heavy cuts that others argued were essential. By the end of 1982, Congress had cut over $19 billion from Reagan’s $258 billion request for fiscal 1983. The House version of the defense appropriations bill (HR 7355) featured an amount 7.2% below Reagan’s request. This was the largest Congressional cut to a defense bill in years.

Furthermore, Reagan suffered a humiliating defeat on the MX missile in late December. The MX was a land based, highly accurate, mobile missile capable of carrying ten independently targeted warheads. It was designed to replace the Minuteman, which was criticized for being vulnerable to a Soviet first strike due to its storage in hardened silos. However, the Carter Administration had struggled with how to better base the MX, at one point proposing a plan that would randomly shuttle the missiles back and forth between thousands of underground launch sites in Utah and Nevada. Reagan also struggled with the basing question, ultimately advocating for what was termed “dense pack” siting. Under this plan, MX missiles would be clustered together in armored silos under the theory that incoming Soviet warheads would destroy one another due to the close proximity of their targets, allowing enough of the MXs to survive unscathed and thereby preserving the U.S.’ retaliatory capacity. The problem was that this “dense pack” theory was just that- a theory- and one that could not even be tested due to restrictions imposed by the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963. Fresh off their midterm triumph, emboldened House Democrats capitalized on this uncertainty and voted against the Administration’s request to fund the MX, by the large margin of 245-176. This was the first time in history that Congress had denied any president’s request for funding for a major nuclear
weapon.

In 1983, policymakers continued to demand that Reagan scale back his fiscal 1984 request from the previously planned level of around $290 billion. In January, Reagan obliged by asking for $273.4 billion in new appropriations. Yet, this gesture did little to placate Congress, especially given that a part of the reduction would be achieved by means of a freeze on military pay, a politically unpalatable idea that the legislature was sure to oppose. In the end, Congress reduced Reagan’s request by an additional $18 billion. Reagan had proposed a fiscal 1984 defense budget that was 10% larger than fiscal 1983 in real terms. Congress only allowed for a real increase of about 4%.

Reagan did win approval on a number of related issues in 1983. For instance, the Administration abandoned any attempt to make the MX impregnable to attack and simply agreed to deploy the missile in existing Minuteman silos. Despite the reality being that this decision removed the rationale for producing the MX in the first place, Congress did finally approve the weapon. Reagan also won support for the B-1 bomber, the Pershing missile and several cruise missiles. However, Reagan encountered some fairly meaningful defeats as well. The House adopted a resolution calling for a freeze on nuclear weapons. The move was pure politics, but it was a resolution that Reagan had intensely opposed nevertheless. Additionally, the Senate voted by a better than 2-1 margin to eliminate a new version of the neutron bomb artillery shell that was designed to destroy Soviet tank columns. And, the House twice rejected the Administrations’ request to end the moratorium on the production of chemical weapons.

1984 brought more of the same. Reagan called for a fiscal 1985 defense budget that was
13.3% higher than the previous fiscal year. No one in Congress took this seriously given the demands that the deficit was placing on domestic programs. After a contentious and drawn out process, Congress finally cut $20 billion from Reagan’s request, agreeing to just a 5% annual real increase. Reagan also again faced a setback on the MX when Congress deferred a decision on whether or not to continue its production until after the election.

If 1983 and 1984 were the years when Reagan’s buildup was slowed, beginning in 1985 the tide turned decisively against him. For fiscal 1986, Congress approved a defense budget of $297.6 billion, an amount that was only $3 billion more than the appropriation for the previous fiscal year. Reagan had asked for $322.2 billion. Due to inflation, however, Congress would actually have had to spend $302.5 billion just to keep pace. Hence, in real terms, the defense budget represented a decline of nearly 2%. This amount was further diminished by automatic cuts stemming from the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings deficit reduction law. As a consequence, the final budget totaled $286.7 billion, a real decrease from fiscal 1985 of 5% in all. Moreover, Congress barred Reagan from developing anti-satellite weapons (ASAT). Reagan had protested this move on the grounds that it would shortchange his leverage with the Soviets in scheduled arms control negotiations. The magnitude of these failures detracted from smaller Reagan victories, like Congressional approval of the production of 21 more MX missiles.

In 1986, this new trend continued. Congress signed off on a defense budget of under $290 billion, which signaled a cut of over $30 billion from Reagan’s request. To produce a zero real growth budget Congress would have had to authorize $301 billion to meet the cost of inflation. Additionally, in August the House adopted a series of amendments to the defense bill
that served to formally reject several key aspects of Reagan’s defense policy. One of these, an amendment that would have banned almost all nuclear testing, was approved by a 3-2 ratio.

Reagan finally acceded to the changed circumstances in 1987. His fiscal 1988 budget tried to increase defense spending by little more than 3% in real terms. This was clearly a far cry from Reagan’s past proposals that sought double digit percentage increases. Reagan’s defense budget totaled $312 billion this year. Yet, he only got $292 billion. This marked the third consecutive year of a real defense decrease. As part of the deal, Reagan also agreed to submit a fiscal 1989 request of $299.5 million, meaning he had accepted in advance another year of real decline (Congressional Quarterly 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989).

The interpretation of this history should be fairly clear: Reagan experienced initial success increasing military spending during his first year in office but his opponents successfully chipped away at that achievement every year thereafter, particularly in 1982 and particularly during his second term when real spending on defense fell every single year. Reagan also suffered a series of more specific losses on issues ranging from the MX to ASAT weapons to chemical agents. Congress therefore does not seem to have been at all persuaded by Reagan’s strong religious rhetoric, a factor that only appeared as part of the discussion, for the most part, beginning in 1982, after Reagan’s early gains.

None of this is to say that Reagan completely failed. Far from it. His first term did secure significant increases in defense spending. But the increases were nowhere near as much as Reagan would have liked and they gradually atrophied. As Kenneth L. Adelman, Reagan’s Director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, aptly acknowledges, “The height
of the Reagan buildup- this massive, awesome buildup- never got to 7% of GNP. It never got to anywhere near the lower part of the Eisenhower administration. That was before Vietnam. Then Kennedy and Johnson came in and very much jacked up the Eisenhower defense budget, even before becoming involved in Vietnam. So when you look at post-World War II averages, the Reagan buildup at its height was probably at the average, and then the ‘dirty little secret’ was, of course, that in the last four years- the whole entire second term of the Reagan administration- it went down, down, down” (Schmertz, Datlof and Ugrinsky 1997, 238).

Reagan’s mantra was “defense is not a budget issue. You spend what you need” (Pach 2003, 90). There can be no conclusion other than that Reagan’s religious rhetoric did not help him to get the country to spend what he believed it “needed.” Public opinion responded to larger developments, not Reagan’s arguments. The media criticized his ideas when they came in a religious packaging- in addition to criticizing that religious packaging, too. And Congress pushed back against Reagan’s budgets starting almost immediately. His last four years in office were marked by real declines in defense spending, not the increases as he wanted. Reagan’s religious rhetoric on defense spending may very well have marked an important departure in the way U.S. presidents had confronted the Soviets. Indeed, Reagan’s broader confrontational approach may have helped precipitate the changes within the Soviet Union that eventually led to its demise. It just didn’t help him get all the money he so badly wanted.
Chapter 7

Just War in the Garden of Good and Evil: George H.W. Bush’s Religious Rhetoric on the Persian Gulf War

It is rather amusing to consider how certain individuals could reach the presidency lacking certain skills that have come to be seen as critical to their prospects for success. For instance, Richard Nixon was the consummate politician, and yet he was at heart a loner who did not draw much pleasure from socializing. Similarly, George H.W. Bush won a job that required him to constantly give public addresses, and yet he was a profoundly weak public speaker. As an aide once acidly observed, Bush “doesn’t give speeches. He gives remarks” (Greene 2000, 145).

In a way, this flaw was a byproduct of both upbringing and genetics. Bush’s mother, Dorothy, had constantly made it clear that self-promotion was an unacceptable activity for the patrician Bushes. George was to be dignified. Once, Dorothy would even criticize her son for listing his achievements in his campaign speeches. At the same time, Bush also lacked natural theatrical talent. He preferred to play things straight and did not inherit the presence of his father, who was a skilled singer himself (Mervin 1996, 55-56).

As a consequence, some of the most basic tasks of the public presidency were exceptional challenges for Bush. For example, a president is expected to comfort the nation in times of tragedy. But Bush was often clueless in these moments. In April 1989 forty-seven U.S. sailors died in an accident aboard the USS Iowa. Flummoxed by the loss, the President reportedly called Ronald Reagan and asked, “How do you do this?” (Greene 2000, 146).
Another quality that Americans also expect and appreciate from their presidents is humor. Reagan, of course, had been a master at not only grief management but also the art of comedy. Bush could have used some lessons here, too. In contrast to his predecessor, Bush’s attempts at humor were good-natured but frequently cringe-worthy. In commencement address after commencement address, Bush told a similar version of the following joke, delivered on this occasion at Alcorn State:

I know how deadly long graduation speeches can be. I’ll never forget Yale University where I went. A man got up, he says, ‘I’m going to give you a brief graduation speech. And I will choose, because our school has a short name, Y. Y is for youth.’ He went on for about 30 minutes. ‘And then it’s A, altruism’- another 20; L, loyalty- rushed that off in about 18 minutes; and then, of course, E, for excellence. He concluded about an hour and a half after he started. And there was one person left, his head bent in prayer. And the minister, the speaker, very touched by it, said, ‘Well, sir, I see that you are praying for these values.’ The man said, ‘No, no.’ He said, ‘I wasn’t praying for the values. I was giving thanks to the Lord that I did not go to Alcorn State University in Lorman, Mississippi. (Bush 1989)

“Jokes” about his well-known antipathy to broccoli were also commonplace. “Bar and I are leaving before dinner, and I apologize for that. We heard you were having broccoli” (Bush 1990a). “I was looking over some of the questions you tackled, like: ‘The Earth’s magnetic field is compressed on the sun-facing side by what?’ Well- the kids behind me know, but for the media out there, the answer is: solar wind. You guys remember that. All I can say is, I wouldn’t have made it past the round where they asked me to spell ‘broccoli’” (Bush 1991h). “Let me tell you this: With all the hue and cry of politics, I cannot think of a better way to spend a Friday noon, Friday afternoon - the big sky and the hot sun, this fantastic view, this marvelous helping of baked beans and coleslaw, not a single piece of broccoli anywhere on that whole table” (Bush
Bush constantly tried to mine laughs from the fact that his wife, Barbara, had once been called the “Silver Fox” and from his Points of Light initiative having been mocked as “Pints of Lite.” He regularly used terms like “deep doo-doo” and called Al Gore “the ozone man.” None of this was very laughable, except in how laughably bad it was.

Regrettably for Bush, his verbal deficiencies were magnified due to his presidency’s unfortunate place in political time, following one brilliant orator (Reagan) and preceding another (Clinton). At least it can be said that Bush was aware of the problem. He once told his speechwriters, “You’re all good writers and are all capable of giving me a speech that’s a ten. But don’t give me a ten because I can’t give a ten speech. Give me an eight and maybe I’ll make it come out a five” (Barilleaux and Rozell 2004, 67).

However, even given his inherent limitations, Bush also seemed to misunderstand the dynamics of politics in the era of twenty four hour news coverage. Like Carter before him, Bush believed that appearing knowledgeable and displaying his competence was his best strategy to ensure positive coverage. He preferred to devote his time to his executive work and he had a profound distaste for the kind of public relations stunts that Reagan had mastered (47-80). As another aide recounted, “This wasn’t going to be like Reagan. We weren’t going to be trying to sell the big speeches, we weren’t going to be having the prime time speeches or going on TV all of the time” (58). Another made the point that Bush had “a visceral antipathy to public communication… he thought poorly of it, he thought it was cheap” (Mervin 1996, 47).

It is not a coincidence then that Bush’s relationship with his speechwriting office was described as “distant.” His speechwriters were comparatively underpaid and the best individuals
were not always hired. To some extent, Bush did not think such investments of his time and money were worthwhile. “I think he saw the rhetorical aspect of the presidency as just one investment of his job… He did not consider it as ubiquitous and all-encompassing as Reagan did…,” one staffer admitted (Barilleaux and Rozell 2004, 68). Overarching themes for his political goals were therefore never developed.

Bush believed all he had to do, beyond effectively carrying out his responsibilities, was to cultivate a good personal relationship with a reporter and it would produce positive stories in return, just like if he did a favor for a member of Congress he could expect a favor back. But the media, of course, is an entirely different animal. Bush’s press secretary, Marlin Fitzwater, provides evidence to support this point of view: “I remember one case where a reporter wrote a very negative story about the president. Bush was surprised. ‘Why did he do that?’ he said. “We had him over to the house, we had such a nice conversation, he came out for the hot dog fry’” (52).

As it was, Bush overcame a lot of these shortcomings and disinclinations as he led the country to war against the regime of Saddam Hussein in 1990 and 1991. As support for his policy towards Iraq atrophied, Bush turned to an extensive, well thought and consistent campaign of religious rhetoric to recover. It is hard to locate much of a payoff from it, though.

The story of the Persian Gulf War begins in the fall of 1980 when Iraq invaded Iran under Hussein’s direction. The eight year war was costly and disastrous for both countries. Their collective economic infrastructures were obliterated and Iraq, aside from losing 250,000 men in combat, was left with a foreign debt approaching $80 billion (Wilentz 2008, 297). What made
the situation far worse from the perspective of the Iraqis is that the country could not use the profits from their oil exports as debt service because prices were in a tailspin at the end of the decade.

Iraq’s neighbor Kuwait compounded these problems. Most of the OPEC member countries had reacted to falling oil prices by pledging to cut back on production, Iraq included. Kuwait refused, though. Saddam also believed that Kuwait was guilty of “slant-drilling,” a technique that would allow the country to siphon off oil that was actually found within Iraq’s borders. Saddam termed these Kuwaiti actions “a kind of war against Iraq” (Greene 2000, 111). Finally, $10 billion of Iraq’s foreign debt was held by the Kuwaitis. Thus it is easy to see why a military offensive began to look appealing to Hussein. Still, even as three armed divisions of the elite Republican Guard massed along the border in July 1990, few observers believed Hussein would go through with an attack. Kuwait did not even mobilize their forces.

But Hussein did invade. On August 2, 1990, around 140,000 Iraqis stormed into Kuwait. The Kuwaitis, unprepared and overmatched, fell quickly; the capital was in Saddam’s possession in under twelve hours. Hussein also moved divisions further south to guard against a counterattack out of Saudi Arabia, a decision that for a while had U.S. commanders convinced that he intended to strike against the Saudis, too. Even if Hussein stood pat, however, an irrational megalomaniac now controlled 21 percent of all the world’s oil supply (Wilentz 2008, 297). If he were to capture Saudi Arabia, he would have 40% (Greene 2000, 115). The West had a big problem on their hands.

The international community united against Iraq’s aggression. Britain, France, West
Germany, Japan and seven other nations joined with the U.S. to freeze Iraqi assets abroad in the immediate aftermath of the attack. Within hours of the invasion, the U.N. Security Council had unanimously passed Resolution 660, which condemned the assault and promised sanctions if Iraq failed to immediately withdraw. The Soviets, despite the grumblings of some decaying Cold Warriors, fully backed the world position. Still, America was clearly the coalition’s leader. On August 8, Bush addressed the nation to announce that he was deploying troops for the protection of Saudi Arabia. By the end of the month, 80,000 coalition soldiers were in place as part of operation Desert Shield. For the time being, diplomatic pressure would be given a chance to work.

In the early months of the showdown, Bush spoke frequently about Iraq but with few references to religion. In fact, in short order he gave two major national addresses on the crisis, but both were practically oriented and straightforward. Bush’s August 8 address was a speech almost entirely devoid of moral and religious rhetoric (Bush 1990e). The President justified his response to the attack by focusing on points such as “a puppet regime imposed from the outside is unacceptable,” “the acquisition of territory by force is unacceptable,” and “if history teaches us anything, it is that we must resist aggression or it will destroy our freedoms.” Bush emphasized that it was important for America to “stand by her friends.” Bush did ask that prayers be said for the soldiers headed to the Middle East, but it was a single line, uttered in closing, and unconnected to the objectives of the policy.

Bush’s second major address fell on September 11 (Bush 1990g). Most of his points

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10 At its peak the coalition forces numbered 700,000 troops. Despite the contributions of thirty five separate countries, America supplied 76% of that total (Wilentz 2008, 298).

were the same as those offered on the August 8. Bush did, however, throw a few new rationales for U.S. involvement into the mix. One was an old Bush favorite—America’s responsibility to craft a “new world order” out of the wreckage of the end of the Cold War. Bush argued that what was happening in the Gulf “offers a rare opportunity to move toward an historic period of cooperation.” This new era would be one where “the nations of the world, East and West, North and South, can prosper and live in harmony” and one where “the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle.” Bush also specifically made mention of the important role that oil played in America’s national interests: “Vital economic interests are at risk as well. Iraq itself controls some 10 percent of the world’s proven oil reserves. Iraq plus Kuwait controls twice that. An Iraq permitted to swallow Kuwait would have the economic and military power, as well as the arrogance, to intimidate and coerce its neighbors—neighbors who control the lion’s share of the world’s remaining oil reserves. We cannot permit a resource so vital to be dominated by one so ruthless” Bush said.

Indeed, oil had heretofore been very prominent in Bush’s comments on the Gulf. In an exchange with reporters on the day of the invasion, Bush acknowledged the role oil would play in motivating a U.S. response, “You’ve heard me say over and over again, however, that we are dependent for close to 50 percent of our energy requirements on the Middle East. And this is one of the reasons I felt that we have to not let our guard down around the world” (Bush 1990c). In an exchange the next day, Bush returned to the same point: “The economic aspects of this are well-known to the American people. And fortunately, right now there’s a bit of an overhang of surplus crude, but that’s short-run. And long-run economic effects on the free world could be
devastating, and that’s one of the reasons I’m as concerned as I am” (Bush 1990d).

However, a conscious decision would be made to instead prioritize the moral/religious dimensions of the standoff as it entered one of its most crucial moments. A quick glance at Charts 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3 reveals that support for both Bush and his handling of the situation in Kuwait steadily declined between August and November.

![Chart 7.1: Bush July 1990 - March 1991 Public Approval](Image)

In Chart 7.1, one can see that Bush’s approval was measured at 74% on August 9, the first reading following the deployment. By November 15 Bush was down to 54%, a precipitous fall of 20 points.

Chart 7.2, on the other hand, provides data for a CBS/NYT poll that surveyed respondents on whether they approved or disapproved of the way the President was handling the invasion. On August 19, Bush’s policy was supported by a margin of 65%-19%. On November 15, the data showed that that same margin has closed to just 50% to 41% support. Bush’s
cushion had dropped from 46% to only 9% in a little over three months.

Gallup data for a very similarly worded question, displayed in Chart 7.3, yields a similar conclusion. At Bush’s peak, on August 19 Gallup found that Americans supported Bush’s maneuvers with respect to Iraq 79% to 14%. On November 18, Gallup’s readings reported that Bush was now receiving 54% to 35% support. Again, a cushion of 65% had shrunk by 46 percentage points.

If Bush needed yet more evidence that he was starting to lose the country, he needed only to look out in the streets. On October 20, thousands of people marched in sixteen different cities in a coordinated protest against the American military build-up. In one protest in New York City
marchers rallying in Times Square chanted “Hell, no, we won’t go; we won’t fight for Texaco” and “Money for peace, not for war” (Nieves 1990).

In truth, the attrition in support for the Commander-in-Chief was coming at the worst possible time for the Administration. On October 31, Bush approved a doubling of the forces the U.S. had stationed in Saudi Arabia. Bush understandably wanted to wait to announce the increase, however, until after the midterm elections. It was not until November 8 that the public learned that the number of U.S troops in the Gulf would surge from 230,000 to more than 500,000. Additionally, over 1,200 M-1 tanks were being shifted to the region as well. Bush’s stated rationale for this tactical change was that he wanted to create an “offensive military option.” All total, this represented the largest mobilization of the American military since the Vietnam War.

Additionally, the U.S. was the current chair of the U.N. Security Council. The
chairmanship would be passed at the end of November to Yemen, one of Iraq’s few allies in the world. Yemen would be certain to oppose the coalition and so, if the U.S. wanted the cover of a resolution authorizing force against Iraq, time was of the essence. On November 3, Secretary of State James Baker embarked on a major trip to rally world support for just such a resolution, traveling to twelve different countries over the course of the month.

In Congress, Bush also began to face more opposition from anti-war Democrats who were growing increasingly concerned as tensions rose. Many Democrats exploded in anger over the troop increase. Comparing Bush’s policy to those of the British Empire of the past, Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-RI) said “we don’t want to be the sole policeman in that part of the world… I’m not sure the American people want to take on that responsibility at this time.” Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-IN) agreed, remarking “we do not stop aggression everywhere in the world.” Sen. Sam Nunn (D-GA) instead linked the run-up to war with the country’s awful experience in Vietnam: “The last thing we need is to have a war over there, a bloody war, and have American boys being sent and brought back in body bags and yet not have the American people behind them. We’ve gone that route one time. We don’t want to do it again” (Weisskopf 1990). Nunn, chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, signaled his intention to hold a series of congressional hearings on the Gulf crisis at the end of November.

Yet Bush could not even count on the support of conservatives in his own party. Many Republican isolationists saw little strategic purpose in defending Kuwait and, like Nunn, fretted over the possibilities for another Vietnam. Bush’s chief critic from the right was the columnist and commentator Pat Buchanan. In one editorial, Buchanan wrote that the Gulf “has quagmire
written all over it” and that Hussein “while a ruthless menace to his neighbors… is no threat to us” (Greene 2000, 124).

At this point, however, there was no backing down for Bush. He had been vocal from the start that Saddam’s aggression could not be allowed to “stand.” No one associated with the Administration believes that Bush ever thought sanctions alone would be enough to force the Iraqis back across their borders. Colin Powell (1995, 469-471) tells a story in his memoirs about a meeting that took place between the President and the country’s top military brass on August 15, only a little less than two weeks after the initial invasion. Powell remembers informing Bush that they would have about two months to assess the impact sanctions were having on Hussein’s regime. But Bush immediately shook his head and replied, “I don’t know if sanctions are going to work in an acceptable time frame.”

Bush worried about the difficulties inherent in maintaining international unity against Iraq for a prolonged period of time and, moreover, there was a limited window in which the U.S. and its allies could launch a counterattack (Bush and Scowcroft 1998, 382). Late February was marked by frequent poor weather in the region, the following month was the Islamic holiday of Ramadan and after that the oppressive desert heat would preclude many military operations. The situation needed to be resolved by no later than January or February, in the President’s mind (385). It was Powell’s justifiable conclusion, then, that “The President did not sound like a man willing to wait long…” Bush was committed to expelling Iraq from Kuwait as soon as possible, whether he acknowledged so publicly or not.

At the same time, every single word Bush uttered on the conflict was the product of an
extensive media strategy that was designed to build grass-roots support for the policy (Harlow 2006, 63-64). Within the White House Office of Communications, staff from across the Administration regularly met to coordinate the President’s message. By the end of its first two weeks of existence, this working group had already distributed talking points to around 20,000 individuals and groups scattered all across the country. They worked to identify surrogate speakers, they arranged for the placement of supportive editorials in key newspapers and they planned presidential briefings for important groups like U.S. veterans. Obviously, Bush, himself, was a key a component of the strategy as he remained its most visible articulator. This kind of organization and message discipline were clearly unique given Bush’s habit of downplaying the importance of the public aspects of presidential leadership.

On several occasions throughout October, Bush’s pollster, Robert Teeter, met with the President to discuss the public Gulf campaign. It was Teeter’s opinion that the administration had too many messages percolating in the atmosphere, that the rhetoric was too unfocused. He urged the President to simplify things and return to the fundamentals (Woodward 1991, 315). James Baker agreed with this analysis. Baker has admitted, “for weeks I’d been frustrated by the administration’s collective inability to articulate a single coherent, consistent rationale for the President’s policy.” In mid-November, Baker believed the administration was finally “beginning to pay a political price at home as a result of our rhetorical confusion. Public support for Desert Shield was starting to unravel” (Hurst 2004, 384). Brett Scowcroft, Bush’s National Security Advisor, also felt the same. He remembers, “We were also running into increasing difficulty making our point understood about what was at stake. One criticism was that we had failed to
explain why our troops were in the Saudi desert, why the United States had to lead the response to Iraq’s aggression. Even supporters would tell the President that public backing would be there, but that we had to state our case more clearly. Too much of the reasoning, they argued, seemed abstract” (Bush and Scowcroft 1998, 398). And, the President, too, was worried. In a November 10 meeting, Bush expressed his confusion over the decline in support for his policy and pointedly asked his closest advisors “What am I doing wrong?” (Mervin 1996, 190).

This is therefore another “come to Jesus” moment. All of these factors- the attrition in support, the Congressional antagonism, the strategic pressures- worried the Administration, contributed to a pervading sense of crisis, and compelled them to search for new public arguments.

Hurst (2004) provides quantitative evidence that Bush did, indeed, change his rhetorical strategy in mid-October in response to the aforementioned developments, moving away from discussing international law and oil in favor of foregrounding issues such as the plight of the hostages Hussein had captured. But partly the Bush team also responded by elevating the role of religious themes in the discussion, something that has gone more or less unnoticed by the literature on the Gulf War to date.

Bush was without question a true believer. He grew up Episcopalian in a religious home, attending Sunday services each weekend at Christ Church in Greenwich, CT. Later in Midland, TX both he and Barbara taught Sunday school at First Presbyterian Church. He had also been a vestryman at St. Ann’s in Kennebunkport, ME, site of the Bush family summer compound (Lejon 2009, 396-399).
Still, the Jimmy Carter style of religious expression was not the forte of the taciturn Bush. And perhaps as a consequence, Bush was always looked at with some suspicion by the religious right. Early in Bush’s term nasty rumors circulated among evangelicals that they were being systematically excluded from staff positions within the White House (Balmer 2008, 127). Additionally, many Christian conservatives resented Bush for his moderation on key social issues. He irritated some on these grounds with actions like including openly gay activists at the ceremonial signing of the Hate Crimes Act. Ultimately many evangelicals felt Bush (as well as Reagan) offered them only symbolic gestures, and focused their efforts for substantive change elsewhere (Wilcox 1996, 85). Nonetheless, despite his potential discomfort in doing so, Bush turned to religious rhetoric in the mid-fall of 1990 as his Iraq policy began to face those very visible storm clouds on the horizon.

None of this is meant to say that Bush never mentioned the religious aspects of the crisis prior to this point. Indeed, he made several visible religious references in his speech to the VFW conference in Baltimore on August 20 (Bush 1990f). Rather, the claim is that only now did Bush begin to prioritize religion, to make it more prominent in his framing attempts, to make it a rhetorical strategy on its own merits.

Evidence of the new approach can be found in a speech he gave to the troops stationed at Hickam Air Force Base in Pearl Harbor, HI on October 28 (Bush 1990h). In his relatively brief remarks, Bush would utilize all three of the major strains of thought that would come to mark his religious rhetoric about the conflict.

First, Bush identified the enemy: “Well, today in the Persian Gulf, the world is once
again faced with the challenge of perfect clarity. Saddam Hussein has given us a whole plateful of clarity, because today, in the Persian Gulf, what we are looking at is good and evil, right and wrong. And day after day, shocking new horrors reveal the true nature of the reign of terror in Kuwait.” It was soon very common for Bush to cast the dispute as a matter of “good and evil,” as he does here.

Countless stories in the Bible are in essence a tale of good versus evil, including the very first in the Book of Genesis, and the very last in the Book of Revelation. The beginning chapters of Genesis tell the story of creation. As part of his process, God created a paradise, Eden, and in its midst he planted a “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen 2: 9). God placed the first man, Adam, and the first woman, Eve, in this garden to tend to it, but he warned them against eating from the tree “for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2: 17). But a serpent tempted Eve, telling her she would become like God were she to eat from the tree. So, Eve took some fruit and gave more to Adam. For their disobedience, the couple was expelled from the garden, doomed now to an inevitable death: “you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3: 19). And having been separated from God, humans soon became capable of much worse; in the next chapter of Genesis Adam’s son, Cain, kills his brother, Abel.

Likewise, the final book of the New Testament, Revelation, forecasts an epic end of times battle between the forces of good and evil. The images contained in Revelation are apocalyptic and frightening- terrible plagues, locusts with the tails of scorpions, beasts with multiple heads, etc. After initial trials, Revelation prophesies that Christ will reign for a thousand years until Satan launches one final assault on God’s people, an assault that will be
defeated when a fire from Heaven devours his followers. Interpretations of the book vary and its content is controversial in nature but its visions have captured the imagination of both Biblical scholars and the wider public for generations (see, for instance, the hugely popular *Left Behind* series of novels).

Since man became cognizant of the difference between good and evil, however, the Bible also commands him to actively choose the former over the latter. For instance, in Amos (5: 14-15): it is written, “Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate.” Similarly, the first letter of Peter (3: 11-12) reads, “let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil” (For similar passages, see Ps 34; Rom 12: 9-21). The conflict of good and evil, then, is a defining feature of Judeo-Christian belief. By calling the U.S. “good” and Saddam “evil,” Bush was creating a narrative with a good deal of religious resonance.

The second theme that Bush constructs in his speech on October 28 is that of a just war. It was only a brief mention: “Saddam Hussein must know the stakes are high, the cause is just and, today more than ever, the determination is real.” Just war theory traditionally has two basic components: *jus ad bellum* (the rightness of starting a war) and *jus in bello* (the ethics that govern how the war is fought). Ostensibly just war theory is a secular device, a way in which a determination can be made about the morality of a war without reference to a higher power. For some scholars, it is certainly treated as such. But historically just war theory is associated
closely with Christianity and more specifically with Roman Catholicism.

Although meaningful contributions were made by early Greco-Roman thinkers like Aristotle and Cicero, Christian philosopher St. Augustine had a singular impact on the development of just war theory. Augustine argued that a just war was one fought with the right intentions. Cruelty, a love of violence, a lust for power - these were the true evils of war to Augustine. A just war, he maintained, was one which was very reluctantly embarked upon, motivated instead by love and a desire to protect innocents.

Augustine’s writings were one of several major religious sources used to create a coherent set of rules for the prosecution of a just war towards the end of the first millennium AD. Papal edicts in 989 and 1027 and the Second Lateran Council of 1139 helped to specify things like protected noncombatants (i.e. women and children) and prohibited the use of certain weapons and actions (i.e. attacking food sources or a church). Later, Catholic theologian St. Thomas Aquinas would contribute important new ideas to the evolving theory; one such idea being the crucial role of proportionality - a war can only be an answer to the most intractable and serious problems. Therefore, just war theory has very specific Christian origins and religious thinkers continue to occupy a large space in the debate, even if they have gradually assumed a secondary role (Orend 2006, 9-27).

There is not necessarily an agreed upon set of *jus ad bellum* conditions for a conflict to be considered a just war. Still, some points in the various formulations significantly overlap. For a war to be just, it must involve a *just cause* such as a direct response to aggression or the protection of human rights. It must be motivated by Augustine’s *right intent*, meaning the war’s
Aims should be in accord with the just cause and not be a product of vengeance or a desire to dominate. The war must also be proportionate to the cause; countries should not fight over small issues. It must be an instrument of a legitimate authority like a state and not a private actor such as a terrorist. The war must have a reasonable prospect of success. If a war is doomed to fail, it should not be undertaken since the damage or suffering would lack purpose. And finally a war must be an option of last resort only. Peaceful alternatives should be first sought before combat is reluctantly entered into (See Brown 2008, 46-47; Cook 2004, 27-32; Johnson 1999, 27-38).

To return to the speech at hand, Bush was thus obliquely making the point that any war against Iraq would meet this criteria. As he said, the cause was just. Particularly so because “Iraq has waged a war of aggression, plundered a peaceful neighbor, held innocents hostage, and gassed its own people.”

The third and final theme that can be located in Bush’s remarks on October 28 is the suggestion that the U.S. has the power of God behind them. In concluding his address, Bush eloquently spoke of the prayers of the country and how they would “reach down to carry the light of a new day” to the soldiers at rest in the Gulf.

As we meet, it is midday in Hawaii. And soon the Sun will be setting across much of America. An hour of prayer, a day of rest, a nation at peace. And soon many of those prayers will follow the Sun westward across the Pacific and Asia. And soon, like the rays of the Sun itself, those prayers will reach down to carry the light of a new day to the brave men and women standing watch over the sands and shores of the Gulf. Not an hour passes that they are not on my mind. And so, we’ve come here to thank you for the important work that you- all of you- do in defending our nation’s freedom, in keeping our nation strong, and holding high the banner of freedom.
Thank you very much for coming. And God bless the United States of America.

The image of prayers washing over the troops is a very powerful image of spiritual support.

In sum, on October 28 we see evidence of Bush describing the conflict in the terms of good and evil, using the concepts of just war theory and proclaiming spiritual backing for the U.S. mission. These three themes came to mark Bush’s Persian Gulf rhetoric, often, as we will see, being used in conjunction with one another.

Bush’s suggestion of God’s sanction was much more overt on November 2 than it had been the previous week. On the 2\textsuperscript{nd}, Bush issued a proclamation calling for a national day of prayer (Bush 1990i). Typically such proclamations are routine, their messages unspecifically religious. But this time Bush focused his call for prayers entirely on events in the Gulf. In his message preceding the proclamation, Bush began by noting that “Throughout American history, the people of this Nation have depended on Almighty God for guidance and wisdom. Both Scripture and experience confirm that the Lord hears the prayers of those who place their trust in Him. Time and again, in peril and uncertainty, doubt and decision, we Americans have turned to God in prayer and, in so doing, found strength and direction.” The President then described the situation in the Middle East. Although he expressed gratitude “for the loyalty, devotion to duty, and sacrifices of the members of our Armed Forces,” he nonetheless concluded that “military strength alone cannot save a nation or bring it prosperity and peace; as the Scripture speaks, ‘Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.’ With these grave concerns before us, we do well to recall as a Nation the power of faith and the efficacy of
prayer.” With this realization in mind, Bush asked the country to “turn to Him, both as individuals and as a Nation,” and to ask “the Lord to grant all leaders of nations involved in this crisis the wisdom and courage to work towards its just and speedy resolution.” In the text of the proclamation, Bush urged the country to “give thanks to God for His mercy and goodness and humbly ask for His continued help and guidance in all our endeavors.”

The proclamation is intriguing. No one thought war was imminent; recall that Bush had yet to even announce that he was doubling the number of troops in the Gulf. Still, Bush set aside a day for national prayer. And in doing so he made the point that America could not be successful in the Mideast without God’s aid (“Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.”). Thankfully though, Bush also implied that America had a special relationship with God and possibly need not worry about having His support (“Throughout American history… we Americans have turned to God in prayer and, in so doing, found strength and direction.”).

At a press conference with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in Paris on November 19, Bush and his counterpart would focus more on the good vs. evil dichotomy than they would on the role that God played in the Gulf (Bush 1990j). Bush argued that the purpose of the coalition was fundamentally a “moral” one: “But that doesn’t make the rationale, the moral underpinning, any less compelling. That rationale is there. You do not brutalize a neighbor. You do not kill and torture. You do not hold innocent civilians. You do not beleaguer an embassy and try to starve its people out in direct contravention of U.N. resolutions. And that’s exactly what he’s doing.” Indeed, Saddam’s brutality was a particular point of emphasis
for the two democratic leaders; the words “brutal” or “brutality” were used eleven times over the course of the press conference. On this occasion, though, Thatcher was more willing to explicitly categorize Saddam as evil. “This is evil. The things that are going on in Kuwait are terrifying. They are brutal. And most people understand that evil has to be stopped,” Thatcher said. And later the Iron Lady added, “What we’ve got now is not peace. There’s no peace in Kuwait; there’s evil. There is daily brutality. There is cruelty. They’re shooting people because they have attempted to hide and protect foreigners in Kuwait. That is not peace. It is the worst brutality and evil.”

In a Thanksgiving trip, Bush reverted back to focusing on the importance of God’s support. Speaking to those aboard the U.S.S. Nassau, the President said:

I reminded some at an Army base a while ago that this reminds me a bit of a Thanksgiving that I spent 46 years ago on a carrier, U.S.S. San Jacinto CVL30, off the coast of the Philippines during World War II. I found then that the Lord does provide many blessings to men and women who face adversity in the name of a noble purpose. They are the blessings of faith and friendship, strength and determination, courage and camaraderie and dedication to duty. And I found that the Lord allows the human spirit the inner resolve to find optimism and hope amidst the most challenging and difficult times. He instills confidence when despair tries to defeat us and inspires teamwork when the individual feels overwhelmed by the events of day to day...

And so, I would like to close these remarks with a prayer.

Lord, bless us and keep us. Show us your way, the way of liberty and love. Soften the hearts of those who would do us harm. Strengthen the hearts of those who protect and defend us. Sustain the hearts of those at home who pray for our safe return. We rely upon your guidance and trust in your judgment, for we are one nation under God. Amidst this threat of war, help us find the will to search for peace. As was said upon the Mount: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” Amen. (Bush 1990k)
In these remarks, Bush did more than merely request the help of God; akin to his earlier proclamation, Bush implied that the country already had him on their side. Bush explicitly claims that God provides “many blessings to men and women who face adversity in the name of a noble purpose.” Obviously, the context suggests that Bush is equating the noble purpose of WWII with the noble purpose that had brought the men on the ship to these far away waters. As such, they, too, will be blessed.

Furthermore, Bush quotes from Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, an incredibly influential sermon which Jesus addressed to his followers from the side of a mountain or hill in Galilee (see Mt 5-7). The Sermon is widely seen as a summation of Jesus’s most important teachings. It opens with the Beatitudes, a series of statements indicating categories of people who enjoy the blessing of God and what they can anticipate as a result. The seventh Beatitude is the one Bush cited, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God” (Mt 5: 9).

The way Bush uses Scripture in this speech leads to the conclusion that America is one of those blessed peacemakers. In the previous line Bush asked God to help the country in its search for peace. Thus the message of these passages is implicitly that America, noble in purpose, a peacemaker, has God behind them.

In a speech to the armed forces based near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia on that same day, Bush highlighted the just war aspects of the showdown instead (Bush 1990l). Bush admitted that “it is fair for Americans to say, why are we here?” He answered his own question by focusing on three different justifications for U.S. intervention- standing up to aggression, ensuring the U.S.’s energy security and protecting innocent life. This last point is an undeniably just cause for war.
Bush made the case that Kuwaiti civilians were imperiled in the starkest of terms: “Number three, we’re here because innocent lives are at stake. We’ve all heard of atrocities in Kuwait that would make the strongest among us weep. It turns your stomach when you listen to the tales of those that have escaped the brutality of Saddam, the invader. Mass hangings. Babies pulled from incubators and scattered like firewood across the floor. Kids shot for failing to display the photos of Saddam Hussein. And he has unleashed a horror on the people of Kuwait.” The President also argued that the U.S. was approaching war as a last resort, another of the criteria for a war to be considered just: “We have been patient. We’ve gone to the United Nations time and time again. I’m prepared to go another time. We still hope for a peaceful settlement, but the world is a dangerous place. And we must make all of these options credible.”

If Thanksgiving was about Iraq for Bush, so too would be Christmas. In a message to the troops on December 24, the President linked the celebration of Christmas with the worsening conditions in the Gulf (Bush 1990m). Bush created the impression that on this holiday Americans would pray equally about each.

Back home, some talk of the cost of war, but it is you who understand the price of peace. Each Christmas Day, we close our eyes in prayer and think of what Harry Truman called the humble surroundings of the Nativity and how from a straw-littered stable shone a light which for nearly 20 centuries has given men strength, comfort, and peace.

It’s distant in time, but close within our hearts; because on this Christmas Day, hour by hour, hand in hand, Americans will send their prayers eastward across the ocean and halfway across the world not only to the town of Bethlehem but to the sands and shores where you stand in harm’s way.

Later in the message, the President also said, “And so it is with the holidays, for tonight
the star of Bethlehem and the candles of the menorah will cast their light in American outposts around the world with a timeless message of hope and renewal that radiates to people of all faiths. Each of you is precious. Each life is important because it touches so many other lives.”

Hence, Bush had inextricably linked the celebration of Christmas to the consequences of his policy in the Gulf. Christmas that year was about more than the miracle that took place two millennia ago in Bethlehem. It was also about what was happening in Saudi Arabia at that very moment.

Alternatively, Bush would again make a strong good and evil argument in an open letter he wrote to the nation’s college students about two weeks later (Bush 1991a). Bush’s letter was sent to 460 college papers across the country. Early in his message, Bush wrote, “The terror Saddam Hussein has imposed upon Kuwait violates every principle of human decency. Listen to what Amnesty International has documented… the extrajudicial execution of hundreds of unarmed civilians, including children. Including children- there’s no horror that could make this a more obvious conflict of good vs. evil.” Bush also would write that because of Hussein “a dark evil has descended in another part of the world.”

At multiple other points throughout his letter, Bush would make the case that America’s morals made standing up to Iraq incumbent upon the country. Bush warned that “If we do not follow the dictates of our inner moral compass and stand up for human life, then his lawlessness will threaten the peace and democracy of the emerging new world order…” Bush additionally told the story of a young solider from Georgia who “understands the moral obligation that has compelled our extraordinary multi-national coalition.” In some sense, these comments were
even less assertive than others Bush had made that same week. In an interview with David Frost just after the New Year, for instance, Bush had said there has been “Nothing like this since World War II. Nothing of this moral importance since World War II” (Devroy 1991a).

Bush’s brief reference to the “extraordinary multi-national coalition” can itself be seen as significant because it insinuates that the legitimate authority criteria of a just war would be met, as well, were the conflict to escalate. Furthermore, Bush did again emphasize that war would only be a last resort, as any just war must be: “I have been in a war. I have known the terror of combat. And I tell you this with all my heart; I don’t want there to be war ever again. I am determined to do absolutely everything possible in the search for a peaceful resolution to this crisis…” So, in this letter we see Bush constructing a justification for war that encompasses many of the different principles of a just one.

As a last point, in his letter Bush also argued that “To reward aggression would be to condone the acts of those who would desecrate the promise of human life itself.” This is religious phrasing, too. To “desecrate” something is to remove the sanctity of it. It is the inverse of “consecrate,” a word signifying the dedication of an object or place to a sacred purpose. Based on the statement above, Bush essentially argues that were the U.S. not to act, it would be an act of sacrilege. This letter perhaps as much as any other document displays the change in Bush’s rhetoric since the initial Iraqi invasion.

Even though Bush had promised to do everything he could to avoid war, war did come. Baker’s November diplomacy had paid off in the form of UN Security Council Resolution 678, agreed to on November 29, which set a deadline of January 15, 1991 for Saddam’s forces to
vacate Kuwaiti territory. Failing that, the UN promised to support “all necessary means” to turn back Hussein’s army. On January 9, Baker and his Iraqi counterpart, foreign minister Tariq Aziz, met in Geneva in a last-ditch attempt to avert war. The meeting was a disaster, ending with Aziz proclaiming “We accept war.”

The U.S. began its air assault on January 16, 1991. It was the commencement of what would ultimately be six weeks of over 100,000 sorties preluding a general ground offensive. On the subsequent day, Bush appeared in public just one time, attending a religious service for government leaders at Memorial Chapel in Fort Meyer, VA. Billy Graham spoke at the service. “This was supposed to the Christian century. But it has been anything but the Christian century. Why can’t we settle our problems in peace?” Graham asked. According to the preacher, the answer was because “there come times when we have to fight for peace.” Graham spoke hopefully that out of the war “will come a new peace and, as has been stated by the president, a new world order” (Rosenfeld 1991). The service concluded with the singing of “Amazing Grace,” after which Graham returned to the White House with the President for lunch. Graham had slept there the previous night. Graham’s activities with Bush, occurring right as the war started, obviously contributed to a religious aura surrounding the U.S. mission.

In fact, Bush was about to attempt to enlist all of the nation’s ministers in his campaign for public approval. With the air war already underway, it was essential that Bush maintain support during the long-run up to the U.S. ground invasion. On January 28, for the fifth time, Bush addressed the annual convention of the nation’s religious broadcasters (Bush 1991b). His speech received considerable media attention. Persuading these men and women, some of whom
were skeptical about the necessity of war, could result in the President’s message being carried
by proxy to the broadcasters’ thousands of listeners. Bush’s speech began with very brief
expressions of support for some of the causes near and dear to the audience—opposing abortion,
restoring school prayer, etc. But the majority of the address was a precise and explicit argument
about how Operation Desert Storm, the code-name for the military’s offensive, met the criteria of
a just war. This address provides proof that Bush was certainly aware of these benchmarks and
without question suggests that his earlier just war statements were not made haphazardly.

Bush transitioned into this part of the address with another recitation of the good vs. evil
duality at hand:

The clergyman Richard Cecil once said, “There are two classes of the wise:
the men who serve God because they have found Him, and the men who
seek Him because they have not found Him yet.” Abroad, as in America,
our task is to serve and seek wisely through the policies we pursue.

Nowhere is this more true than in the Persian Gulf where—despite
protestations of Saddam Hussein— it is not Iraq against the United States, it’s
the regime of Saddam Hussein against the rest of the world. Saddam tried
to cast this conflict as a religious war, but it has nothing to do with religion
per se. It has, on the other hand, everything to do with what religion
embodies: good versus evil, right versus wrong, human dignity and freedom
versus tyranny and oppression. The war in the Gulf is not a Christian war, a
Jewish war, or a Moslem war; it is a just war. And it is a war with which
good will prevail.

Next, Bush discussed the origins of the principles of a just war, making reference to
many of the intellectual luminaries discussed above such as Cicero, Augustine and Aquinas.

Then, Bush tested the conflict against several of the standards of a just war. To start, Bush said,
“The first principle of a just war is that it support a just cause.” And, as Bush continued, “Our
cause could not be more noble. We seek Iraq’s withdrawal from Kuwait—completely,
immediately, and without condition; the restoration of Kuwait’s legitimate government; and the security and stability of the Gulf. We will see that Kuwait once again is free, that the nightmare of Iraq’s occupation has ended, and that naked aggression will not be rewarded. We seek nothing for ourselves.”

Bush then turned to the criteria that “a just war must also be declared by legitimate authority” and noted that the coalition, composed of twenty eight nations from six continents, was backed by twelve UN Security Council resolutions. He added that a “just war must be a last resort” and proved that this had been so by citing James Baker’s extensive diplomatic efforts, “more than 200 meetings with foreign dignitaries; 10 diplomatic missions; 6 congressional appearances; over 103,000 miles traveled to talk with, among others, members of the United Nations, the Arab League, and the European Community.” He also made reference to the *jus in bello* dictate that noncombatants be protected, pointing out that the U.S. would “make every effort possible to keep causalities to a minimum.”

In closing, Bush once more articulated the notion that God was on America’s team: “My fellow Americans, I firmly believe in my heart of hearts that times will soon be on the side of peace because the world is overwhelmingly on the side of God.”

Admittedly, given that this speech was delivered to an audience of spiritual leaders, the high degree of religious rhetoric is unsurprising. Still, it has already been shown that Bush discussed the standoff in the context of just war principles on multiple previous occasions in front of broader publics. It would not appear that that was a coincidence. This address is testament to the idea that Bush consistently tried to frame the Gulf War as a just war, even if
sometimes he was not quite as overt about it. His speech before the religious broadcasters made many of the usual points, just in a slightly different way.

In fact, Bush would use just war rhetoric before the entire country the following evening in his State of the Union address (Bush 1991c). The address was fixated on foreign policy. Bush was the first president to give a State of the Union address while the nation was at war since the end of Vietnam. As such, he displayed little appetite for bold new domestic initiatives. Iraq, the end of the Cold War, etc.; these were the topics. And Bush had put Iraq in a religious frame of reference by the eighth paragraph of the speech:

Tonight, we work to achieve another victory, a victory over tyranny and savage aggression.

We in this Union enter the last decade of the 20th century thankful for our blessings, steadfast in our purpose, aware of our difficulties, and responsive to our duties at home and around the world. For two centuries, America has served the world as an inspiring example of freedom and democracy. For generations, America has led the struggle to preserve and extend the blessings of liberty. And today, in a rapidly changing world, American leadership is indispensable. Americans know that leadership brings burdens and sacrifices. But we also know why the hopes of humanity turn to us. We are Americans; we have a unique responsibility to do the hard work of freedom. And when we do, freedom works.

The conviction and courage we see in the Persian Gulf today is simply the American character in action. The indomitable spirit that is contributing to this victory for world peace and justice is the same spirit that gives us the power and the potential to meet our toughest challenges at home. We are resolute and resourceful. If we can selflessly confront the evil for the sake of good in a land so far away, then surely we can make this land all that it should be.

All three of Bush’s major religious themes can be identified in these lines. First, Bush implies once more that God is on America’s side. He says that it is up to America “to preserve
and extend the blessings of liberty.” This formulation is right out of Eisenhower’s playbook. Bush calls liberty a “blessing,” a literal gift from God. The inference is that by spreading liberty, as the U.S. was doing in Kuwait, America was helping to bring about God’s plan for the world.

Second, Bush also makes use of another of the themes, the opposition of good and evil. The United States, Bush said, was “selflessly confronting the evil for the sake of good in a land so far away.” A short while later, Bush would build on this dichotomy with the use of some well-timed light and dark imagery: “As Americans, we know that there are times when we must step forward and accept our responsibility to lead the world away from the dark chaos of dictators, toward the brighter promise of a better day.” Hussein represents evil and “dark chaos,” America good and a “brighter promise of a better day.”

Third, the Commander-in-Chief used the just war theme in a passage towards the end of the speech.

Each of us will measure within ourselves the value of this great struggle. Any cost in lives—any cost—is beyond our power to measure. But the cost of closing our eyes to aggression is beyond mankind’s power to imagine. This we do know: Our cause is just; our cause is moral; our cause is right.

Let future generations understand the burden and the blessings of freedom. Let them say we stood where duty required us to stand. Let them know that, together, we affirmed America and the world as a community of conscience.

As is readily apparent, here Bush defends the war on the just cause criteria: “Our cause is just; our cause is moral; our cause is right.” Further, for a second time, he calls freedom a “blessing,” one that “duty required” us to defend. As a smaller point, he also refers to the coalition as a “community of conscience,” again alluding to the religious motivations behind the
U.S. offensive.

Bush had already declared one national day of prayer prior to the onset of hostilities. In February, Bush would declare another. Bush announced his intentions in his remarks at the national prayer breakfast on January 31 (Bush 1991d). Bush made it very clear on this occasion that America could not hope to be successful without God’s assistance.

You know, America is a nation founded under God. And from our very beginnings we have relied upon His strength and guidance in war and in peace. And this is something we must never forget… I have learned what I suppose every President has learned, and that is that one cannot be President of our country without faith in God and without knowing with certainty that we are one nation under God… God is our rock and salvation, and we must trust Him and keep faith in Him.

And so, we ask His blessings upon us and upon every member not just of our Armed Forces but of our coalition armed forces, with respect for the religious diversity that is represented as these 28 countries stand up against aggression.

Today I’m asking and designating that Sunday, February 3rd, be a national day of prayer. And I encourage all people of faith to say a special prayer on that day- a prayer for peace, a prayer for the safety of our troops, a prayer for their families, a prayer for the innocents caught up in this war, and a prayer that God will continue to bless the United States of America.

The President publicized the event the following day in remarks he made to the community at Fort Stewart, Georgia (Bush 1991e). “With those brave young men and women in mind, let this nation come together this Sunday- day after tomorrow- on a day that will be our National Day of Prayer. We are, you see, one nation under God. And we will pray for the safety of every American and allied serviceman and servicewoman, for every innocent caught up in this terrible conflict, and for our POW’s and for our MIA’s. And may all of our troops be safe and sound until the families of Fort Stewart are united once again.”
It is worth mentioning that in his speech, Bush made reference to the good vs. evil and just war rhetorical themes, too. At one point, Bush explained,

It began with Kuwait, but that wouldn’t have been the end. What we’ve witnessed these last few weeks removed any last shred of doubt about the adversary that we face: the terror bombing, without military value- the terror bombing of innocent civilians with those Scud missiles; the brutal treatment- that brutal, inhumane treatment of our POW’s; the endless appetite for evil that would lead a man to make war on the world’s environment. All of us know what we’re up against. All of you know why we’re there.

We are there because we are Americans, part of something that’s larger than ourselves. Our cause is right. Our cause is just. And because it is just, that world’s cause will prevail.

The day of prayer was scheduled for February 3. Bush issued both a proclamation (Bush 1991f) and gave a national radio address (Bush 1991g) about the meaning of the day. What’s remarkable about each is that Bush left the distinct impression that America already had found God’s favor.

The proclamation began:

As one Nation under God, we Americans are deeply mindful of both our dependence on the Almighty and our obligations as a people He has richly blessed. From our very beginnings as a Nation, we have relied upon God’s strength and guidance in war and peace. Entrusted with the holy gift of freedom and allowed to prosper in its great light, we have a responsibility to serve as a beacon to the world- to use our strength and resources to help those suffering in the darkness of tyranny and repression.

Today the United States is engaged in a great struggle to uphold the principles of national sovereignty and international order and to defend the lives and liberty of innocent people. It is an armed struggle we made every possible effort to avoid through extraordinary diplomatic efforts to resolve the matter peacefully, yet- given no choice by a ruthless dictator who would wield political and economic hegemony over other nations through force and terror- it is a struggle we wage with conviction and resolve. Our cause
is moral and just.

Bush claims that America has certain “obligations as a people He has richly blessed” and that “Entrusted with the holy gift of freedom… we have a responsibility to… use our strength and resources to help those suffering in the darkness of tyranny and repression.” Like the State of the Union, the subtext is that America’s mission in the Gulf is God’s mission. He has blessed the country, given it the “holy” gift of freedom, and in return its people must spread these benefits with others. Such is America’s “responsibility.” At the same time, Bush yet again refers to the coalition’s just cause (“Our cause is moral and just.”).

The radio address opened along the same lines as the proclamation.

At this moment, America, the finest, most loving nation on Earth, is at war, at war against the oldest enemy of the human spirit: evil that threatens world peace.

At this moment, men and women of courage and endurance stand on the harsh desert and sail the seas of the Gulf. By their presence they’re bearing witness to the fact that the triumph of the moral order is the vision that compels us. At this moment, those of us here at home are thinking of them and of the future of our world. I recall Abraham Lincoln and his anguish during the Civil War. He turned to prayer, saying: “I’ve been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I have nowhere else to go.”

So many of us, compelled by a deep need for God’s wisdom in all we do, turn to prayer. We pray for God’s protection in all we undertake, for God’s love to fill all hearts, and for God’s peace to be the moral North Star that guides us. So, I have proclaimed Sunday, February 3rd, National Day of Prayer. In this moment of crisis, may Americans of every creed turn to our greatest power and unite together in prayer.

The good vs. evil theme is present in the very first line (“evil that threatens world peace”). But Bush is also claiming that America’s actions in the Gulf are being driven by a
“moral order,” just like people usually take direction, he says, from God’s “moral North Star.” The motivations appear to be religious and Godly in each case.

On February 24, the coalition opened its ground attack. The outcome was never in doubt. Iraq’s forces were completely overwhelmed. Many of the enemy soldiers simply dropped their firearms and enthusiastically welcomed the advancing Americans, chanting “M-R-E,” U.S. military slang for “Meals Ready to Eat.” Others flashed victory signs in lieu of white flags. A cease fire was declared exactly 100 hours after the rout had begun. Though certainly one combat loss is one combat loss too many, just 148 Americans died in action. For perspective, that total was fewer than the number of Americans who were murdered inside the U.S. during those same 100 hours (Greene 2000, 130). Desert Storm was a stunning military success, minting Gens. Norman Schwartzkopf and Colin Powell as national heroes overnight.

To review, beginning in the mid-fall, Bush mounted a very vigorous and very religious rhetorical strategy as he worked to rally the country behind his war plans. Bush was responding to a very serious deterioration in his position. Support for his leadership and his policy was on the decline, Congress was turning against him, protesters were in the street and all the while he was in the process of escalating the conflict, making the backing of these actors more crucial than ever. With his back to the wall, Bush reacted by declaring two national days of prayer. He shrewdly used Billy Graham to give the war a mantle of spiritual legitimacy. His rhetoric became marked by three consistent and easily identifiable religious themes: that the Gulf War was a conflict between good and evil; that the Gulf War was a just war; and that in the Gulf War American both needed and had God’s support. The question that remains outstanding is what
difference did all of this make?

As far as public opinion goes, a second look at Chart 7.1 would at first impress. In January, Bush’s personal approval rating skyrocketed. The President hovered at over 80% approval for the second half of the month, and he maintained that lofty standing well into the start of April. On February 28, he hit a high of 89%. Similarly, Chart 7.2 shows that in the same time frame Bush rose to a place where over 80% of the country approved of his handling of the Iraqi invasion.

This incredible upwelling of support cannot, however, in any way be attributed to the effect of Bush’s religious rhetoric. Scholars of public opinion have long documented the existence of a “rally-round-the-flag effect” that provides the president with a short term boost following important happenings abroad. Broadly speaking, major foreign policy events trigger a short-term increase in presidential popularity as the country unites around its leader in a time of trial. This is especially so when it comes to war. Roosevelt was polling in the mid 50s until the country entered World War II; he soon found his numbers in the 70s. Following the outbreak of the Korean War, Truman gained 9 points. When the fighting in Vietnam escalated in 1966, Johnson received a boost of 8 points. Even minor conflicts, like Reagan’s quick invasion of Grenada, can benefit a president (Erikson and Tedin 2011, 120-121).

Therefore, Bush’s remarkable New Year rise in the polls was merely a side effect of an understandable burst of patriotic pride that accompanied the country’s first real military venture post-Vietnam. If we wish to evaluate the impact of Bush’s rhetoric, it is thus wise to limit ourselves to examining opinion following his change in rhetoric (roughly beginning in
November) but prior to the start of the fighting (and thus prior to the incidence of the rally-round-the-flag effect). And here the record is less favorable for Bush.

Charts 7.1 and 7.2 both show that the public was fairly stable in terms of how they evaluated Bush’s handling of the Iraq question. His switch to a religious rationale circa November 1990 did not appear to make a difference either way. In both graphs the trend lines instead plateau for the remainder of the year. For instance, in the Gallup poll on Iraq, opposition fluctuated only in an 8 point range for the entire period between November and mid-January. Likewise, in this approximately three month period Bush’s own approval rating, though it had its share of spikes, remained centered around 60%. If Bush’s religious rhetoric had been influential, we’d expect to see positive trends on all three of these graphs, in particular the ones tracking issue-specific opinion. The graphs instead show stability, providing evidence that Bush was unable to reacquire the higher level of support he enjoyed at the start of the crisis.

Bush did give one major speech where he framed the Gulf War in religious terms, his State of the Union address on January 29, 1991. Bush’s approval rating before the address was measured at 74% on January 26. On the 30th, his rating hit 82%. The 8 point increase would indicate a statistically significant change. However, there are a couple of important qualifications. First, the State of the Union came less than two weeks after the start of the war so the numbers are contaminated by the rally-round-the-flag effect. And, second, Bush received the approval of 82% of respondents on January 19, and 83% of respondents on January 23. This makes us question whether the 74% mark he received on the 26th might not have been an aberration. Indeed, Bush would not poll that low again until May 2. The 82% support he
received on the 30th was therefore very much in line with what Bush typically experienced during these early months of 1991.

So, collectively, Bush’s rhetoric does not seem to have helped boost his standing prior to the onset of the war and the circumstances surrounding the 8 point increase he saw following his one major religious speech are somewhat questionable, as well.

As Table 7.1 clearly shows, the editorial reaction to Bush’s religiously infused 1991 State of the Union address was shockingly out of step with the President’s high approval ratings at the time. The average editorial was scored a solidly negative 2.10. Moreover, 67.5% of all pieces were negative in tone. This statistic is in striking contrast to the just 17.5% of op-eds that were supportive of Bush’s Gulf War policies.

The President’s critics did share a number of common concerns. One frequent complaint that echoed in many of these editorials was that Bush was pursuing a course that would inevitably lead to the use of chemical weapons, both by and against the United States. Sidel and Geiger (1991), for instance, wrote that if Bush refused to change direction “a downward spiral to mass destruction- human, environmental and social, on a scale that would make devastating oil slicks or the burning of oilfields seem trivial by comparison- may well lie ahead.” They saw the U.S. “lurching toward the trip wire” (see also Gelb 1991).

A second group of critics were fixated on what they saw as diplomatic bungling by the Bush Administration. Many felt that Bush and his State Department were not being entirely candid about the country’s objectives in Iraq. Rosenthal (1991), to cite a prominent example, observed, “At a time when it is essential for the American public and the world to understand
Table 7.1: Editorial Coverage of Bush’s 1991 State of the Union Address

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Paper</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>1/30/91</td>
<td><em>Chicago Tribune</em></td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“To Defeat Saddam, Liberate Kuwait”</td>
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<td>1/30/91</td>
<td><em>New York Times</em></td>
<td>Leslie Gelb</td>
<td>“Gas, Germs and Nukes”</td>
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<td>1/30/91</td>
<td><em>New York Times</em></td>
<td>Tom Wicker</td>
<td>“The Key to Unity”</td>
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<td><em>Washington Post</em></td>
<td>Robert Hunter</td>
<td>“The Battle of Ideas”</td>
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<tr>
<td>1/30/91</td>
<td><em>Washington Post</em></td>
<td>Robert Samuelson</td>
<td>“Don’t Worry About the War’s Cost”</td>
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<tr>
<td>1/31/91</td>
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<td>Stephen Chapman</td>
<td>“The War and Its Critics”</td>
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<td><em>Los Angeles Times</em></td>
<td>Joshua Muravchik</td>
<td>“Striking a Balance With Evil”</td>
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<tr>
<td>1/31/91</td>
<td><em>Los Angeles Times</em></td>
<td>John Mack and Jeffrey Rubin</td>
<td>“Is This Any Way to Wage Peace?”</td>
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<td>Richard Cohen</td>
<td>“Saddam Left Us No Choice”</td>
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<td>George Will</td>
<td>“Hard Work Avoided”</td>
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<td>Mike Royko</td>
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<td>Steve Daley</td>
<td>“Promise of a New World Order Doesn’t Include the Old Problems at Home”</td>
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<td>Negative Articles</td>
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<td>Mixed/Neutral Articles</td>
<td>6 (15.0%)</td>
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precisely what the U.S. is doing politically in the gulf and why, the word of the U.S. is becoming fuzzy, subject to different interpretations, and sometimes simply not believed.” Rosenthal termed U.S. diplomacy “quintessentially dangerous” and “too clever by half” (see also Safire 1991).

A sizable collection of writers were also extremely dismayed by the State of the Union’s single-minded focus on the events happening in Iraq, which they felt came at the expense of other pressing domestic problems. Anna Quindlen (1991) compared the United States to the Port Authority Bus Terminal, a facility that had recently undergone an extensive renovation. Like Port Authority, the U.S. looked good on the outside but within it was marred by glaring social troubles. Blasting the domestic parts of Bush’s speech as “sketchy, perfunctory and shockingly beside the point,” Quindlen argued that “a one-track mind is not enough for government.” She continued, “If the President thinks only of war, the home front will have disintegrated, in some cases beyond repair.” Steve Daley (1991) of the Tribune concurred, writing “The stain of homelessness and impoverished children, of dysfunctional schools and a banking system collapsing under the weight of greed and mismanagement is troubling, but we must keep our eye on the new world order. That, said George Bush, is the payoff for the war in the Persian Gulf. Apparently, our only limits are at home. Across the water, there is nothing we cannot do and plenty we must do.” Even reliable conservative George Will (1991a) was willing to castigate the Republican president on these grounds. Responding to Bush’s claim that America was doing the “hard work of freedom” in Iraq, Will countered, “Providing such schools, sustaining such families and policing such streets- call that the hard work of freedom.”
But, from the perspective of this study, the most interesting reaction to Bush’s State of the Union address was the negative response writers had to its overt religious themes. Several commentators devoted column space solely for the purpose of attacking Bush’s repeated religious justifications for the war. Royko (1991), commenting on the “many Americans… convinced that God is always our side,” wondered whether those same individuals “think he dozed off during the Vietnam War.” In a bitter piece, Colman McCarthy (1991) expanded on the same point. McCarthy claimed that Bush had been using Billy Graham as “the ultimate in evangelistic ground-and-air support” in order to “show that God is on our side.” However, Graham and other “pious hawks,” as McCarthy branded them, refused to admit their true purpose, which McCarthy claimed was “to fight for peace by saturation bombing, by slaughtering Iraqi civilians and further bankrupting our own economy while we do it.”

In a more restrained critique, scholar Martin Marty (1991) considered Bush’s just war claims in an essay printed in the Los Angeles Times. Marty believed that through his rhetorical choices “Bush took risks- and not only among the non-believing minority.” “Many believers, even those who support Bush’s course of action, are edgy about the sort of words he used,” Marty wrote. Bush was ill-advised to claim that God was on America’s side, even before an audience of religious leaders, because “As evangelists, they work on an opposite assumption: The world needs rescue and souls need saving precisely because the world is overwhelmingly not on the side of God.” Indeed, Bush was not even correct to discuss the war in the terms of just war theory, Marty argued, because he was only doing so to “legitimize already-made choices,” rather than to evaluate alternate courses of action.
George Will (1991b) chimed in on Bush’s religious rhetoric, too. For Will, the issue was the application of Bush’s principles. Will felt that the President was being hypocritical. “The Bush administration’s moralism has been in conspicuous abeyance regarding China,” Will observed. He continued, “When the Bush administration made defeating Saddam such a moral mission, critics worried that the rationale lacked a limiting principle: Would America become incontinently active in attempting to right all the world’s wrongs? The administration’s limp response to Gorbachev’s intensified dictatorship suggests that the critics can relax.” “The New World Order evidently rests on a moral principle with a single application,” Will concluded.

It is worth mentioning a few other pieces of reporting that appeared in these papers this week. Multiple journalists, struck by Bush’s constant religious rhetoric, chose to investigate the President’s linguistic choices a little further. As Maureen Dowd (1991) observed in the New York Times that “The President who always tended to shy away from rallying the American public to any cause for any sustained period is now offering a passionate disquisition on good versus evil, right versus wrong, a just war, a moral use of force, virtue and vice, religious values and the will of God.” These facts alone made Bush’s religious rhetoric intrinsically interesting. However, Dowd also made the point that this type of rhetoric would create all sorts of problems for Bush in the future. People would now be more willing to judge the President’s other actions on the same moral standards, limiting his ability to make pragmatic choices, Dowd said. As Dowd concluded, “now that Mr. Bush has shown his moral edge, he may not be able to sheathe it after the Iraqis are punished.”

In a similar article appearing in the Post, Laura Sessions Stepp (1991) wrote that Bush
and Saddam were engaged in a “holy war of words” and she noted the abundant similarities between the arguments the two leaders had been making before their people. Stepp, too, warned of the calamitous consequences that might follow this type of language. Religion “blurs cultural similarities that might enhance diplomacy” and it “emphasizes differences, and has the potential to inflame the conflict,” she wrote. Stepp quoted George Weigel, president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, who expressed his personal opinion that any speech implying “God is on our side” is “an unfortunate use of words.” If so, then Bush had been making a lot of unfortunate statements.

In sum, Bush’s religious rhetoric in his 1991 State of the Union address was unpersuasive so far as the media was concerned. Many writers simply looked past Bush’s moralizing and harped on a series of pre-existing political shortcomings—Bush’s evident lack of concern over possible chemical attacks, his lack of attention to domestic issues and so on. Others reacted quite critically to Bush’s religious language itself, disputing his categorizations of the Persian Gulf War as a just war being fought between the forces of good and evil. Thus, this may very well be one instance were religious rhetoric hurt the president, rather than helping him.

In Congress, Bush’s policy ultimately prevailed but not absent heavy opposition. Bush decided to formally ask Congress for a vote authorizing the use of force against Iraq, pursuant to the demands of the earlier UN resolutions. This request went against the advice of many members of his cabinet, including Defense Secretary Dick Cheney who worried that Congress might very well reject the measure. Bush did not think he needed such a resolution to act—indeed he was prepared to use force even were it to fail: “In truth, even had Congress not passed
the resolution I would have acted and ordered our troops into combat. I know it would have caused an outcry, but it was the right thing to do. I was comfortable in my own mind that I had the constitutional authority” (Bush and Scowcroft 1998, 446). Still, Bush felt it important to have Congress on the record supporting the decision, if at all possible.

The resolutions, Solarz-Michel in the House and Dole-Warner in the Senate, were introduced on January 10, 1991. The debate was mostly civil, despite having to be suspended several times on account of anti-war disruptions in the visitors gallery. Still the President took a beating from the war’s opponents. Sen. Sam Nunn (D-GA) said “I don’t think a war at this time is wise and I think there are alternatives.” Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY) tried to minimize the stakes, claiming “All that’s happened is that one nasty little country invaded a littler but just as nasty country.” “Just this morning I heard it said that there may be ‘only’ a few thousand American causalities. But for the families of those few thousand… the word will have no meaning,” said Sen. George Mitchell (D-MN), “And the truly haunting question, which no one will ever be able to answer, will be: did they die unnecessarily? For if we go to war now, no one will ever know if sanctions would have worked if given a full and fair chance.” Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-CA) struck the same note, arguing that the country was “about to be sucked into a war in the area of the world known for violence, known for terrorism, known for blood baths, known for atrocities. We will never be the same again.” “There is still time to save the President from himself. And save thousands of American soldiers in the Persian Gulf from dying in the desert in a war whose cruelty will be exceeded only by the lack of any rational necessity for waging it,” Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-MA) warned (445).
On January 12, however, both houses did vote to support the joint resolution. Solarz-Michel passed 250-183, while Dole-Warner passed 52-47. These tight votes were a considerable disappointment for Bush. Almost every member who the Administration felt was persuadable received multiple appeals for a positive vote. Bush desperately wanted a convincing gesture of bipartisan support. In his memoirs, Bush writes, “I also hoped to avoid turning this into a party-line vote” (441).

On these grounds, the President clearly failed. The vote in the Senate was the closest in history for a declaration of war (Maynard 2008, 81). For perspective, consider that the Gulf of Tonkin resolution passed in the Senate by a vote of 88-2 and in the House it was unopposed, 414-0. The closeness of the vote on the Gulf War could only be compared to the vote for the War of 1812 (79 to 49 in the House, 19 to 13 in the Senate) and even that had more support. The vote was also heavily partisan. In the House, 164 Republicans and 86 Democrats voted for the resolution. 179 Democrats, 3 Republicans and 1 independent voted against it. In the Senate, the majority was composed of 42 Republicans and 10 Democrats. Only two Republicans joined 45 Democrats in the opposition. Bush wanted a bipartisan, comfortable vote that would show “Saddam we were speaking as one voice” (Bush and Scowcroft 1998, 441). Instead, the picture that emerged was one of conflict and division. Given that the vote was entirely symbolic (Bush intended to attack regardless of its outcome), even though Bush was on the winning side we must see the resolution as somewhat of failure.

In the end, perhaps the biggest indictment of Bush’s religious rhetoric was that it was not even unreservedly successful in persuading those individuals most susceptible to this kind of
rhetorical device. Several days before the onset of the air attack, the Society of Christian Ethics voted 97 to 20 that the use of force in the Gulf would not meet the criteria for a just war (Washington Post 1991b). Major religious officials ranging from Pope John Paul II to the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Most Rev. Edmond L. Browning, remained steadfast in their opposition.

Born of crisis, with public support falling, Congressional opposition rising and important moves (increasing troop levels in Saudi Arabia, key U.N. votes, etc.) on the horizon, Bush embraced a religious rhetorical strategy. This was atypical for a President who cared little for public relations and was kept at arm’s length by many of the country’s religious leaders. Nevertheless, Bush consistently advanced three religious arguments about the Gulf War: that it was a conflict of good and evil, that it was just and that God was on America’s side. He called for two national days of prayer and shrewdly involved Billy Graham in his crusade. But, all this appears inconsequential. Bush received no opinion benefits in the crucial November to January period that preceded his rally-round-the-flag boost, his religious rhetoric was rejected by the media following his State of the Union address and his resolution in Congress was historically divisive. If religious rhetoric cannot help a war-time president, when can it help any president?
Chapter 8

God’s Gift to Humanity: George W. Bush’s Religious Rhetoric on the War on Terror

George W. Bush’s life dramatically changed course on the morning of July 28, 1986. Bush had been struggling for quite some time. In 1978, he had been decisively defeated in a run for the U.S. Congress. Bush’s opponent had effectively tagged him as an East Coast elitist, a charge that left Bush deeply resentful. It was Bush, after all, who used to strut around the campus of Harvard Business School in his National Guard bomber jacket. It was Bush who liked to sit in the back of his classes and spit tobacco into a Styrofoam cup. Bush’s political failures were only compounded by his business troubles. The oil industry as whole suffered a downturn in the early 1980s and Bush fared worst than most. His company, Bush Exploration, fell to a ranking of 993 among all Texas oil concerns. At the same time, Bush ran into problems at home. His wife, Laura, a demure librarian from Austin, was gradually growing tired of Bush’s drinking, carousing and generally boorish behavior. A DUI arrest had had precious little impact on George. Although no source alleges that Bush was an alcoholic, it was nevertheless obvious that Bush’s drinking habits were a cause for concern.

July 28 was the morning after Bush’s fortieth birthday party. The previous evening featured a raucous, alcohol-fueled binge at the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs. Bush is known for his commitment to physical fitness. The Texan works out several times a week, he loves being outdoors, he loves clearing brush and he loved to run, though issues with his knees eventually forced him to switch to mountain biking. Yet when Bush attempted to go for his post-
birthday run he found himself unable to move. Hung-over and utterly miserable, Bush vowed to never touch alcohol again. To his great credit, this was a vow he kept. Instead, Bush turned to God for guidance and practical help in abandoning liquor. Bush later admitted to group of religious social workers, “I would not be president today if I hadn’t stopped drinking 17 years ago. And I could only do that with the grace of God” (Smith 2006, 372).

The title of Bush’s campaign autobiography is A Charge to Keep. It is a reference to Bush’s favorite hymnal- a hymn he would sing at his inauguration as Texas Governor in 1995 and a hymn he would memorialize while in the White House by means of a painting of the same name that he had hung in the Oval Office. These series of refrains would come to define Bush’s life: “A charge to keep have I, a God to glorify, a never-dying soul to save, and fit it for the sky/To serve the present age, my calling to fulfill; O may it all my powers engage, to do my Master’s will!”

Bush’s acceptance of Christianity, in fact, was a bit more gradual than this anecdote would lead one to assume (Aikman 2009; Smith 2006, 365-413). The first of what would be three major turning points for Bush (the failed run being the last) occurred in April 1984 with the arrival of Pentecostal evangelist Arthur Blessitt in Midland, TX. Blessitt was most known for lugging a twelve-foot high cross all around the world while he spread the good news. Blessitt planned to conduct a weeklong crusade in Midland and an interested Bush requested a private meeting. In a moment much like the sermon that sparked Carter’s born-again experience, Bush was asked by Blessitt whether he could be sure that when he died he would go to Heaven. Bush honestly answered he could not.
A second encounter with Billy Graham would build upon the impact of this initial experience for Bush. The preacher was an old personal friend of Bush’s parents. In the summer of 1985, Graham and Bush happened to visit the family’s compound in Kennebunkport, MN during the same week. One afternoon, Bush and Graham decided to go for a walk together on the beach. This was a changing moment in Bush’s life as Graham prodded the younger man about his relationship with God. Bush recalls, “That weekend my faith took on new meaning. It was the beginning of a new walk where I would recommit my heart to Jesus Christ” (Aikman 2009, 485).

In the next months, Bush lived up his resolutions. He began to attend bible study meetings back home and he became an active participant in the local Methodist congregation. Bush continues those habits to this very day. Even in the midst of the multitude of crises he dealt with as president, Bush still made sure to find time for Bible study each and every day. Bush understandably credits his faith with turning his life around. As he once said, “Without it I would be a different person, and without it I doubt I’d be here today” (Bush 2001a). When asked during a December 1999 Republican primary debate who his favorite philosopher was, Bush famously answered Christ, “because he changed my heart.” “When you turn your heart and your life over to Christ,” Bush continued, “when you accept Christ as the Savior, it changes your life.”

If Bush’s life had dramatically changed course on July 28, 1986, Bush’s presidency dramatically changed course on the morning of September 11, 2001. On that serene morning, nineteen men armed with little more than mace and box-cutters high-jacked four airline flights. In the carnage that ensued, the terrorists destroyed both towers of the World Trade Center in
New York and did serious damage to the Pentagon in Washington. A fourth plane, United 93, crashed in a deserted field in Pennsylvania when the passengers, by then aware of what was happening elsewhere, heroically overwhelmed the terrorists in the cockpit. Around 3,000 people died on 9/11 in the worst attack ever on the United States.

Terrorism had not been high on the agenda for the new president. Neither Bush nor Democratic nominee John Kerry had discussed the issue much in the 2000 campaign. The issues the two debated were those that voters had indicated were important to them, topics like HMOs and prescription drug coverage, school violence and moral values. The Administration’s first foreign policy discussions centered more on how to deal with Russia and China and missile defense, rather than what to do about religious fanatics thousands of miles away. The attacks changed everything. Quickly, Bush declared that the country was at war with “terror.” The country’s goals in this new war were later formalized in National Security Presidential Decision 9, issued in October 2001. In this document, Bush set an extremely ambitious standard for success: “the elimination of terrorism as a threat to our way of life.” The war would start with al Qaeda, but that organization was only to be the first of many that would be targeted for eradication. The Bush Administration had concluded that in a hegemonic world linked together by emerging technologies, the existence of any and all anti-American extremists now constituted an unacceptable risk to the country’s way of life (Naftali 2010, 66).

The term “war on terror” is an amorphous one. Although thought to originate with Bush, it was actually Reagan who first began speaking of such a conflict. The precise objectives that the term encompasses are very much up for debate, though. Even the phrase “war on terror”
itself is a cause for dispute. Some, such as former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, have never accepted its legitimacy. Brzezinski has said that the use of the phrase “war on terror” was a mistake and that it created a regrettable “siege mentality” and a “culture of fear” (Anderson 2011, 73). Still, a broad definition of the war on terror may nevertheless be possible. Most analysts would likely include the war in Afghanistan, the freezing of terrorist financial assets, the USA PATRIOT Act legislation, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and the war in Iraq as part of the collection of policies that Bush, at least, considered to comprise the war on terror. These are the policies that this chapter will pay the most attention to. This definition, of course, leaves unresolved the contemporary debate about whether there was any connection between the war in Iraq and terrorism. It is enough for our purposes to simply grant that Bush thought the two were one and the same.

Many of the methods Bush adopted in the war on terror were incredibly controversial. Bush spent much of his time in public defending the choices he had made. It mattered little who he was speaking to. A gathering of school children would hear nearly the exact same justifications for action that Bush would offer to a parliament abroad.

Bush’s speeches on terrorism typically featured a number of common points. He unfailingly would outline what some would label the “Bush doctrine,” that being the idea that any state or regime that harbored terrorists should be considered just as culpable as the terrorists themselves. Another point Bush would frequently make was an explanation of why he thought the terrorists hated America in the first place, how they resented the country’s freedoms of speech, press and religion. The President would also repeatedly tell audiences that their
conceptions of America’s security needed to evolve, that oceans no longer offered protection and that as a consequence America had to aggressively confront threats wherever they arose. There would be some bluster, like talk of a price to be paid, of individual terrorists who were “no longer a problem” or warnings of what happens to those who are guilty of “messing with” America. There would even be some strained attempts at humor. Bush’s standard speech included a line that usually drew laughs where the President stated that the terrorists had miscalculated when they assumed that the U.S. was weak and materialistic. The terrorists must have, Bush would say, seen some “lousy movies.” Or the terrorists wrongly believed that all the country would do is file a “couple of lawsuits” in retaliation.

Of course, religious language would be a prominent dimension of Bush’s rhetoric on terrorism as well. The terrible events of September 11 without question qualify as a “crisis,” which it is being argued seems to be a precondition for the appearance of religious rhetoric. In the introduction, the reader has already encountered a discussion of the first occasion on which Bush used instrumental religious rhetoric, his speech to the nation on September 20, 2001 (Bush 2001d). In this address, Bush identified America’s enemies and made clear his expectations for how the world should deal with them (“Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make: Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists”). But, as was said before, it was Bush’s closing lines that were most remarkable. In these paragraphs, the President mixed overt invocations of God, saying explicitly that he would not be “neutral” in the days ahead, with a more subtly charged religious vocabulary (i.e. the use of words like “mission” and “patient justice”). These important lines are excerpted once more below:
Great harm has been done to us. We have suffered great loss. And in our grief and anger, we have found our mission and our moment. Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom, the great achievement of our time and the great hope of every time, now depends on us. Our Nation—this generation—will lift a dark threat of violence from our people and our future…

The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them.

Fellow citizens, we’ll meet violence with patient justice, assured of the rightness of our cause and confident of the victories to come. In all that lies before us, may God grant us wisdom, and may He watch over the United States of America.

Of course, this selection is not the only religious content to be found in the body of the text. Bush pointedly claimed that the terrorists’ main goal was “to kill Christians and Jews.” He explicitly told the public that they should pray, because “Prayer… will help strengthen us for the journey ahead.” He spoke emotionally of the prayers being said for America in Paris, London and Seoul.

From these beginnings, Bush’s religious rhetoric would ultimately come to be defined by two basic trajectories. The first was that Bush consistently depicted the war on terror as a massive “ideological” struggle between good and evil. The reader knows from the previous chapter on Bush’s father that the battle between good and evil is one of the most prominent and well recognized Biblical themes. The prominence of this Manichean vision would be heightened by the media, which tended to respond favorably to Bush’s rhetorical cues and echo some of his religious themes in their reporting (Domke 2004). Although this motif would be a constant in Bush’s discourse, it would be most visible in the first year after 9/11.
The second religious theme marking Bush’s rhetoric on terrorism would be the idea that America was fighting not just for its own safety, but for the preservation of freedom as well. Freedom, Bush always said, was God’s “gift” to humanity. America was therefore fighting for “God given” rights. This religious theme would first emerge only as Bush moved to expand the war on terror beyond Afghanistan in late 2002. Again, traces of this theme would remain visible in Bush’s remarks until the very last days of his administration. I will consider each point in turn.

Bush spoke of good and evil to a degree that is fairly unprecedented among modern U.S. presidents. The word evil or a word taking evil as its base (i.e. “evildoers”) appears in 711 Bush public documents between 2001 and 2008. The terrorist attacks made this mode of religious rhetoric intuitive. The attacks were not just aimed against representations of America’s political and military power, they were attacks on its moral, cultural and religious identity as well. The events of 9/11 therefore made some question America’s place as a “chosen” nation. Why had this happened to us? Bush moved to reassert traditional beliefs by focusing on the evil of America’s enemies as contrasted with the U.S.’ own inherent goodness (Roof 2010).

In remarks he made to the FBI just two weeks after 9/11, Bush (2001e) clearly expressed his understanding of the attacks: “I see things this way: The people who did this act on America and who may be planning further acts are evil people. They don’t represent an ideology; they don’t represent a legitimate political group of people. They’re flat evil. That’s all they can think about, is evil. And as a nation of good folks, we’re going to hunt them down, and we’re going to find them, and we will bring them to justice. Ours is a nation that does not seek revenge, but we
do seek justice. And I don’t care how long it takes to rout out terrorism, we’re going to do it. We will take the time and effort and spend the resources necessary to … find these… evildoers who did what they did to America on September the 11th…” The terrorists are “evil people” and “flat evil,” the U.S., on the other hand, is a “nation of good folks.” In the months immediately after the attacks, a similar version of these sentiments can be found in almost every single Bush transcript.

At times, Bush’s fixation on good and evil could be nearly overwhelming. For example, in a short, off the cuff speech he made to the State Department in late 2001, Bush (2001h) used the word “evil” or one of its variants nine separate times. Bush told the audience that the country intended to make it “clear to the evildoers that we reject you,” that the upcoming fight would be “a war between good and evil” and he reminded them that “in order to overcome evil, the great goodness of America must come forth and shine forth.” Bush would occasionally even call the military campaign a “war on evil” rather than his more common designation of a war on terror (see, i.e., Bush 2001i).

At the same time, Bush was careful to specify exactly who was evil. As it happens, Bush quite often defended Islam as a great and peaceful religion, in the process earning himself worldwide praise then and now. The teachings of Islam, Bush once said, are the “exact opposite of the teachings of the Al Qaida organization, which is based upon evil and hate and destruction” (Bush 2001g). Instead, it was bin Laden who was evil- and not a true Muslim, either, for that matter. When asked whether bin Laden was a religious or a political leader, Bush gave the following response:
Q. Granted the extremism, do you- and I’d like to ask the imam the same question- do you consider bin Laden a religious leader or a political leader?

The President. I consider bin Laden an evil man. And I don’t think there’s any religious justification for what he has in mind. Islam is a religion of love, not hate. This is a man who hates. This is a man who’s declared war on innocent people. This is a man who doesn’t mind destroying women and children. This is a man who hates freedom. This is an evil man.

Q. But does he have political goals?

The President. He has got evil goals. And it’s hard to think in conventional terms about a man so dominated by evil that he’s willing to do what he thinks he’s going to get away with. But he’s not going to get away with it (Bush 2001f).

Clearly, then, no one could accuse Bush of failing to offer a moral vision of what was at stake. At the national prayer breakfast in 2002, Bush (2002b) explained how his own personal faith had led him to see the world in such absolutes: “At the same time, faith shows us the reality of good and the reality of evil. Some acts and choices in this world have eternal consequences. It is always and everywhere wrong to target and kill the innocent. It is always and everywhere wrong to be cruel and hateful, to enslave and oppress. It is always and everywhere right to be kind and just, to protect the lives of others, and to lay down your life for a friend.”

Similarly, in a commencement address at West Point, Bush (2002g) explained that the United States had a long history of facing down evil in the world. The war on terror, to Bush, was no different from the previous fight against international communism. Bush believed that there were universal moral truths in each contest and he implored the graduates to see things his way. By calling certain individuals or organizations “evil,” Bush maintained that he did not create any additional problems, rather he was only calling attention to problems that already
Because the war on terror will require resolve and patience, it will also require firm moral purpose. In this way our struggle is similar to the cold war. Now, as then, our enemies are totalitarians, holding a creed of power with no place for human dignity. Now, as then, they seek to impose a joyless conformity, to control every life and all of life.

America confronted imperial communism in many different ways, diplomatic, economic, and military. Yet, moral clarity was essential to our victory in the cold war. When leaders like John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan refused to gloss over the brutality of tyrants, they gave hope to prisoners and dissidents and exiles and rallied free nations to a great cause.

Some worry that it is somehow undiplomatic or impolite to speak the language of right and wrong. I disagree. Different circumstances require different methods but not different moralities. Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place. Targeting innocent civilians for murder is always and everywhere wrong. Brutality against women is always and everywhere wrong. There can be no neutrality between justice and cruelty, between the innocent and the guilty. We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name. By confronting evil and lawless regimes, we do not create a problem; we reveal a problem. And we will lead the world in opposing it.

At the same time, it was precisely because the U.S. stood for good against evil that the country could be confident of an eventual victory in the war on terror. Bush would often admit in his speeches that he saw a “purpose” behind history and that God was not, as Bush said in that September 20 address, neutral. Bush offered another example of this stream of thinking in his first address to the United Nations in November 2001 (Bush 2001j)

But the outcome of this conflict is certain: There is a current in history, and it runs toward freedom. Our enemies resent it and dismiss it. But the dreams of mankind are defined by liberty: the natural right to create and build and worship and live in dignity. When men and women are released from oppression and isolation, they find fulfillment and hope, and they leave poverty by the millions.
These aspirations are lifting up the peoples of Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, and they can lift up all of the Islamic world.

We stand for the permanent hopes of humanity, and those hopes will not be denied. We’re confident, too, that history has an author who fills time and eternity with His purpose. We know that evil is real, but good will prevail against it. This is the teaching of many faiths, and in that assurance we gain strength for a long journey.

One of the major criticisms leveled at Bush’s response to 9/11 was the claim that the President did not call for enough sacrifice from the public. That he squandered a moment of unified purpose, asking no more than for people to continue to shop and take vacations. It is true that Bush called for people to spend money and go about their normal lives. But a close inspection of his good and evil rhetoric reveals that Bush also frequently told ordinary citizens that one way in which they could aid the war on terror was by doing good in their own communities. Bush believed that out of the evil of the attacks, good might still come- a view he expressed to a meeting in Tennessee in the spring of 2002: “You know, I truly believe that out of this evil is going to come incredible good. I believe that by remaining strong in the face of terror, that we can lead the world to peace. I believe there’s going to be some problems in the world that can be solved with American strength and American leadership and a coalition that refuses to bend when it comes to the defense of terror. And out of evil will come some incredible good in America, some incredible good” (Bush 2002e).

Bush did not hesitate to volunteer some suggestions about the ways in which good could be a product of evil. Mostly these were concrete ideas about how any individual could help their neighbors. A standard example of this style of advice can be found in remarks Bush delivered to the men and women stationed at an Air Force base in Alaska in early 2002 (Bush 2002c):
As you probably figured out by now, I view this current conflict as either us versus them, and evil versus good. And there’s no in-between. There’s no hedging. And if you want to join the war against evil, do some good. If you want to be a part of our Nation’s stand against those who murder innocent people for the sake of murder, for those who believe in tyranny, for those who hijack a noble religion— if you want to take a stand, love a neighbor like you’d like to be loved yourself.

If you want to be a part of the war, walk across the street and say to a shut-in elderly person, “What can I do to help you,” or mentor a child, or get into your public schools here in Anchorage, or provide support for people, or go to your church or synagogue or mosque and walk out with a program that says, “I want to help somebody in need.” Feed the hungry. If you want to be a part of the war against terror, remember that it’s the gathering momentum of millions and millions of acts of kindness that take place in America that stands squarely in the face of evil.

The enemy hit us, and they made a huge mistake. Not only will our Nation seek justice, but out of the evil will come incredible goodness. Out of the evil will become America more resolved not only to defend freedom, more resolved to sacrifice, if necessary, to defend the freedom, but America resolved to show the world our true strength, which is the compassionate, decent heart of the American people.

In truth, Bush concluded most of his speeches in similar fashion throughout his first several years in office (see, for example, Bush 2002a; Bush 2002d; Bush 2002f).

The President did somewhat tone down the good and evil language in late 2002 as he increasingly turned to other themes. However, this bifurcated outlook on U.S. foreign policy would re-emerge in full force in late 2005 and early 2006 as conditions began to unravel in Iraq. In a series of potent speeches, Bush made the case that it was precisely because the insurgents were so evil, that it was necessary to oppose them and to finish the mission. In Norfolk, Virginia in October of 2005, for example, Bush (2005b) connected the insurgent leaders to the evil men of the past, observing “Some might be tempted to dismiss these goals as fanatical or extreme. They
are fanatical and extreme, but they should not be dismissed. Our enemy is utterly committed. As Zawahiri (Zarqawi)* has vowed, ‘We will either achieve victory over the human race, or we will pass to the eternal life.’ And the civilized world knows very well that other fanatics in history, from Hitler to Stalin to Pol Pot, consumed whole nations in war and genocide before leaving the stage of history. Evil men, obsessed with ambition and unburdened by conscience, must be taken very seriously- and we must stop them before their crimes can multiply.” At other points in his talk, Bush identified the insurgents as a version of “evil Islamic radicalism” and he described their goals as “evil but not insane.” In yet another speech given just a few weeks later in Pennsylvania, Bush (2005c) warned “Evil men who want to use horrendous weapons against us are working in deadly earnest to gain them.” He once more made the connection to Hitler and others and again argued “Evil men, obsessed with ambition and unburdened by conscience, must be taken very seriously, and we must stop them before their crimes can multiply” (for another example, see also Bush 2005d).

Still, by late 2002, Bush had begun to prioritize in his rhetoric not the unending conflict between good and evil in the world but instead the preeminent importance of freedom. We can easily gather from Bush’s speeches that the President sincerely believed that the expansion of human freedom was the single best way to guarantee the long-term safety of America. He would remind his audiences that Europe had seen hundreds of years of war until the rapid spread of democracy across the continent in the latter half of the 20th century. Or, he would point to Japan, and explain how it was that the adoption of democratic institutions in that country had led to a long-term peaceful alliance with the U.S., its former enemy. Bush believed that democracies did
not go to war with each other, thereby subscribing to a theory that has been the subject of much empirical political science research (Ray 1998).

Freedom was especially important, Bush felt, in the Mideast. He often took his listeners inside the head of an Islamic radical and asked them how they would react if they had no opportunity, no rights, and no prospect of improving their circumstances. Sometimes, he could explain the rationale of a terrorist in the starkest of terms: “Our security depends on there to be a alternative to the ideology of hate. Because if there’s resentment and hate, it’s easier to recruit 19 kids to get on an airplane and kill 3,000 people” (Bush 2007a).

What is so interesting about Bush’s views on freedom is that there is a precise religious component to them. In a question and answer session in Manhattan, Kansas in early 2006, Bush succinctly presented his thoughts on this connection. He told the attendees that he believes that there is a God and, moreover, that God created man to be free. If people agree, Bush said, then it is important for America to lead the fight for liberty: “History has shown that democracies yield the peace… And that’s what the enemy understands, and that’s why they’re so brutal and relentless. They understand the march of peace will be contagious. Part of my decisionmaking process is my firm belief in the natural rights of men and women, my belief that deep in everybody’s soul is the desire to live free. I believe there’s an Almighty, and I believe the Almighty’s great gift to each man and woman in this world is the desire to be free. This isn’t America’s gift to the world; it is a universal gift to the world. And people want to be free. And if you believe that and if you believe freedom yields the peace, it’s important for the United States of America, with friends, to lead the cause of liberty” (Bush 2006). Hence, in addition to
the practical reasons that exist for promoting freedom, Bush also claimed there was a decidedly spiritual rationale at work, as well. This merging of both the practical and spiritual reasons for supporting political freedom was made plain in a much noted speech Bush made celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy when he observed, “Liberty is both the plan of heaven for humanity and the best hope for progress here on Earth” (Bush 2003i). The nation’s and God’s goals were conveniently aligned. Although Bush would never publicly acknowledge it, the Bible is replete with stories of liberation, a good example being the travails of the Israelites in the Old Testament. The existence of this religious tradition made this rhetorical point culturally very powerful (McAdams 2011, 195-230).

In speaking as such, Bush was thus articulating a common view held among many evangelicals. There is a widespread perception that evangelicals are generally supporters of isolationism. This has always been somewhat false and, indeed, is becoming more so over time (den Dulk 2007). The modern evangelical movement began to emerge during the Cold War, led by a series of preachers who regularly spoke out against “Godless” communism. During the Bush Administration, evangelicals fought for legislation against human trafficking, debt and AIDS relief for Africa, sanctions on China and North Korea and for the U.S. to take the lead in mediating religious conflict in Sudan.

Survey data reveals that evangelicals are in reality quite receptive to an internationalist foreign policy. Over 69% of committed evangelicals agree that the U.S. should play a special role in the world (216). At once, this data helps to account for why Bush, someone who identifies with the evangelical community, would hold these beliefs about freedom. But this data
also helps to account for why it was beneficial for Bush to admit to it. There was a large portion of the public who would naturally be susceptible to such logic. Bush was encouraged to actively appeal to the evangelical community by his top political advisor Karl Rove, who had concluded that his boss had been hurt in 2000 when evangelical turnout was lower than anticipated. By crunching the numbers, Rove realized that Bush could win re-election in 2004 through a “play-to-the-base” strategy. Rove’s tactics do appear to have paid off for Bush; Bush’s share of the white evangelical vote in 2004 went from 72% to 78% and his share of the Catholic vote rose from 47% to 52%. These gains may have made the difference in certain swing states like Ohio (Kruse 2010).

Still, lest we forget, a belief in American exceptionalism is hardly limited to evangelicals alone. In a recent national survey funded by the Ford Foundation, 58% of all Americans either “mostly” or “completely” agreed with the statement “God has granted America a special role in human history” (Public Religion Research Institute 2010). In fact, some have argued that America’s desire to save other peoples is the driving impulse behind the entirety of American history. As Wilson once said, the mission of America is the “redemption of the world.” Tuveson (1968) has traced the origins of this idea to the Protestant Reformation. During the Reformation, old, pessimistic, Augustinian notions about the nature of man were cast aside in favor of new, more optimistic alternatives that left open the possibility of the establishment of a utopia on earth. If evil is to be defeated, if this utopia is to be created, then it stood to reason that God would have selected certain vessels to fight his battles. Increasingly, Americans thought they were that vessel, that they were a “chosen nation” or a chosen people, a new Israel. God
meant for the country to spread the blessings of liberty to others. Tuveson shows that these ideas were visible in American culture from the country’s inception, pointing out their appearance in the work of individuals as diverse as John Edwards and Harriet Beecher Stowe. So, by tapping into this tradition, there was a very high potential payoff that Bush could have expected to receive.

It would therefore not be realistic to think that Bush pushed these claims simply because he wanted to. Bush’s presidency was one of the most carefully managed in modern history (Maltese 2009). Despite his outward disdain for polls (and his predecessor’s supposed obsession with them), Bush relied heavily on surveys and focus groups, all the while cloaking these activities in secrecy. It is a little known fact that Bush increased the number of White House staff devoted to speech-writing and spun off the Office of Media Affairs into its own separate department. Importantly, he also hired Scott Sforza, a former ABC News television producer, as deputy communications director. It was Sforza who was responsible for the staging of Bush’s addresses. Like Reagan, Bush recognized the power of visual images and it was Sforza’s job to present the President in the most favorable light, whether by means of signs or banners highlighting Bush’s daily message or through the strategic positioning of the television cameras.

In one example, when Bush spoke at Mount Rushmore in 2002, aides ensured that the television crews filmed Bush from the side so that the President’s face would be captured in perfect alignment with the legends carved in stone. Admittedly, sometimes Sforza’s stagecraft could backfire. It was Sforza who was ultimately responsible for Bush’s infamous May 2003 landing aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln in a S-3B Viking jet. The president triumphantly emerged in a
full flight suit, projecting an image of a muscular commander-in-chief. Not even Eisenhower, one of the greatest generals in American history, had worn military dress while in office. Later that night, Bush gave a boastful address on the ship announcing the end of major combat operations in Iraq. Behind him a giant banner waved declaring “Mission Accomplished.” These images would later come back to haunt Bush when Iraq exploded in sectarian violence. But these mistakes were the exceptions, not the rule.

The major point is that the Bush White House left little to chance when it came to their communications strategy. In fact, when they could not guarantee favorable press coverage, they were willing to pay for it. In early 2005 the Washington Post reported that Armstrong Williams, a national conservative commentator, had been paid $241,000 by the Education Department to promote Bush’s No Child Left Behind education reforms. Later investigations revealed that several other media figures, including syndicated columnists Maggie Gallagher and Michael McManus, were also being paid by the Department of Health and Human services in return for supporting Bush’s position on marriage.

So there is little evidence to suggest that Bush’s God and freedom rhetoric was anything other than a strategic choice. Bush’s top speech-writer, Michael Gerson, has admitted that the Administration gave ample consideration to the questions of when and how to use religion in the President’s speeches. Gerson told a seminar of journalists in 2004 that Bush made so many religious references because these ideas were “our culture. They are literary allusions understood by millions of Americans.” (Mattingly 2004). Accordingly, the lines on freedom became a standard part of Bush’s typical stump speech. Further, they only emerged as Bush
began to campaign for military action in Iraq - a campaign that was itself an extremely well-coordinated media operation. Arguments for selling the war were developed as early as the summer of 2002. Bush’s speech at West Point, a speech discussed above, was a field test of sorts. And the only reason Bush did not begin his push until September was because, as White House Chief of Staff Andy Card candidly told *The New York Times*, “From a marketing point of view you don’t introduce new products in August” (McClellan 2008, 119-147).

The first major example of Bush attempting to link the pursuit of freedom to God’s intentions was his national address to the country on the first anniversary of September 11 (Bush 2002h). The speech’s setting was yet another shrewd contribution by Sforza. Bush spoke to the country from Ellis Island with the Statute of Liberty towering in the background. Sforza rented three barges of spotlights to position around the statute’s base in order to provide a glowing backdrop for the President. Under normal circumstances, this address could have been expected to be an example of the comforting and calming variant of presidential religious rhetoric. But that is not what took place. The next day, September 12, Bush was scheduled to deliver a much-anticipated speech at the U.N. on Iraq. Bush left little doubt that his speech on the 11th was the opening salvo when he said, “We are joined by a great coalition of nations to rid the world of terror. And we will not allow any terrorist or tyrant to threaten civilization with weapons of mass murder. Now and in the future, Americans will live as free people, not in fear and never at the mercy of any foreign plot or power.” The “tyrant” threatening civilization with “weapons of mass murder” was undoubtedly Saddam Hussein.

Yet in this address, Bush prefaced the religious rationale that would come to be a
hallmark of his rhetoric about Iraq:

Our deepest national conviction is that every life is precious, because every life is the gift of a Creator who intended us to live in liberty and equality. More than anything else, this separates us from the enemy we fight. We value every life. Our enemies value none, not even the innocent, not even their own. And we seek the freedom and opportunity that give meaning and value to life.

There is a line in our time and in every time between those who believe that all men are created equal and those who believe that some men and women and children are expendable in the pursuit of power. There is a line in our time and in every time between the defenders of human liberty and those who seek to master the minds and souls of others. Our generation has now heard history’s call, and we will answer it.

Clearly Bush was expanding the aims of the war on terror by calling attention to the “line” between those who believe in “a Creator who intended us to live in liberty” and those who do not. In a way, this language is merely another iteration of the good vs. evil contrast. But Bush would not stop there, calling the defense of freedom the U.S.’ “sacred promise,” Bush announced that it was also God who had assigned the country this task:

We cannot know all that lies ahead. Yet, we do know that God has placed us together in this moment, to grieve together, to stand together, to serve each other and our country. And the duty we have been given, defending America and our freedom, is also a privilege we share. We’re prepared for this journey, and our prayer tonight is that God will see us through and keep us worthy.

Tomorrow is September the 12th. A milestone is passed, and a mission goes on. Be confident. Our country is strong, and our cause is even larger than our country. Ours is the cause of human dignity, freedom guided by conscience and guarded by peace. This ideal of America is the hope of all mankind. That hope drew millions to this harbor. That hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it.

The reader should also note the abundant smaller religious references present in these
paragraphs. The appeal to prayer, the location of the source of the cause as the guidance of conscience, the light and dark imagery. In the end, Bush’s speech on September 11, 2002 was an incredibly religious address.

This speech was only the start of Bush’s linkage between freedom, God and U.S. policy towards Iraq. One only needs to examine a few of the many speeches Bush gave where he intertwined these three elements to get a sense of this aspect of his rhetorical strategy. For instance, in Shreveport, LA in late December 2002, Bush averred, “I believe that by doing what we need to do to secure the world from terrorist attack, to rid tyrants of weapons of mass destruction, to make sure that somebody like Saddam Hussein doesn’t serve as a training base or a provider of weapons of mass destruction to terrorist networks- by doing our job, that the world will be more peaceful, by standing strong for what we believe, by remembering that freedom is not America’s gift to the world, but God’s gift to each and every human being, that we can achieve peace. I want you to tell your kids and your grandkids that amidst all the speculation about war and military, that our drive and our vision is for a peaceful world in which everybody can realize their potential and live in peace” (Bush 2002i).

In a slight contrast, in a speech in Grand Rapids, MI in January, Bush chose to downplay the practical, security based rationale for invading Iraq. Instead, such an action would be motivated by the country’s most fundamental values, most significantly America’s shared belief that freedom is mandated from above: “This great, powerful Nation is motivated not by power for power’s sake but because of our values. If everybody matters, if every life counts, then we should hope everybody has the great God’s gift of freedom. We go into Iraq to disarm the
country. We will also go in to make sure that those who are hungry are fed, those who need health care will have health care, those youngsters who need education will get education. But most of all, we will uphold our values. And the biggest value we hold dear is the value of freedom. As I said last night, freedom and liberty, they are not America’s gifts to the world. They are God’s gift to humanity. We hold that thought dear to our hearts” (Bush 2003a).

As Bush suggested in the previous passage when he referenced the U.S.’s humanitarian efforts, Bush also argued that America’s values led the country to have great concern for the Iraqis living under Saddam Hussein’s oppression. This was a point Bush made more explicit in remarks he made later in Kennesaw, GA: “We defend the security of our country, but our cause is broader. If war is forced upon us, we will liberate the people of Iraq from a cruel and violent dictator. The Iraqi people today are not treated with dignity, but they have the right to live in dignity. The Iraqi people today are not allowed to speak out for freedom, but they have a right to live in freedom. We don’t believe freedom and liberty are America’s gift to the world; we believe they are the Almighty’s gift to mankind. And for the oppressed people of Iraq, people whose lives we care about, the day of freedom is drawing near” (Bush 2003f).

The values Bush identified were not just ascribed to Americans, however. Bush would from time to time attribute the same set of beliefs to the citizens of other democracies, too— one example being the off-the-cuff remarks he made to the Australian people at the end of a press conference with their Prime Minister, John Howard, just before the onset of hostilities:

My personal message is that I want to keep the peace and make the world more peaceful. I understand why people don’t like to commit the military to action. I can understand that. I’m the person in this country that hugs the mothers and the widows if their son or husband dies. I know people would
like to avoid armed conflict, and so would I. But the risks of doing nothing far outweigh the risks of whatever it takes to disarm Saddam Hussein.

I’ve thought long and hard about this issue. My job is to protect the American people from further harm. I believe that Saddam Hussein is a threat to the American people. I also know he’s a threat to our friends and allies.

The second thing- my message is, and I started speaking about this today, I also have got great compassion and concern for the Iraqi people. These are people who have been tortured and brutalized, people who have been raped because they may disagree with Saddam Hussein. He’s a brutal dictator. In this country and in Australia, people believe that everybody has got worth, everybody counts, that everybody is equal in the eyes of the Almighty. So the issue is not only peace, the issue is freedom and liberty.

I made it clear in my State of the Union- and the people of Australia must understand this- I don’t believe liberty is America’s gift to the world. I believe it is God’s gift to humanity (Bush 2003d).

The speeches excerpted above are just a sampling of the different ways in which Bush strove to link God’s purposes with America’s own interest in freedom. As aforementioned, Bush made this point a part of his standard appeal and many other noteworthy examples exist (see also, for example, Bush 2003f; Bush 2003g; Bush 2003h, etc.). The truth is, most Americans should probably be familiar with this strain of religious rhetoric if for no other reason than Bush made freedom the focal point of his second inaugural address (Bush 2005a). It was, as could be expected, another extremely religious national address.11 It was also quite possibly Bush’s finest speech as president and one of the better inaugurals on record.

By just the fifth paragraph Bush had already offered his thesis, saying, “We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion: The survival of liberty in our land increasingly

11 Interestingly, Bush’s second inaugural was originally even more religious than it turned out to be. A quote from Leviticus was excised from the final draft (Safire 2005).
depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.” Bush proceeded to note how the practical and spiritual rationales for freedom, arguments he had been making all along, had now merged so that “America’s vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one.” “From the day of our founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this Earth has rights and dignity and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of heaven and Earth,” Bush went on. “Across the generations, we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master and no one deserves to be a slave. Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation. It is the honorable achievement of our fathers. Now, it is the urgent requirement of our Nation’s security and the calling of our time.” Bush declared that America’s “ideal of freedom” was a basic part of the country’s spiritual tradition, a tradition “sustained in our national life by the truths of Sinai, the Sermon on the Mount, the words of the Koran, and the varied faiths of our people.” Given this grounding, America’s foreign policy, Bush maintained, thus served to “clarify the choice before every ruler and every nation, the moral choice between oppression, which is always wrong, and freedom, which is eternally right.” Freedom was “eternally right” because it appealed to “every soul.”

Additionally, Bush employed some carefully constructed light/dark imagery, a rhetorical tendency of the President’s that we have already encountered some evidence of. In this case, Bush explained how “And as hope kindles hope, millions more will find it. By our efforts, we have lit a fire as well, a fire in the minds of men. It warms those who feel its power. It burns those who fight its progress. And one day this untamed fire of freedom will reach the darkest
corners of our world.” It was America which represented the light, the fire, and the dictators of the world who represented those dark corners.

Similar to the good and evil theme, the fact that America was acting in pursuit of God’s plans for the world once more led Bush to express optimism and assurance about the ultimate outcome of the struggle against terrorism. Bush made this point, too, in his second inaugural, quoting Abraham Lincoln when he said, “The rulers of outlaw regimes can know that we still believe as Abraham Lincoln did: ‘Those who deny freedom to others deserves it not for themselves and, under the rule of a just God, cannot long retain it.’” Later in the address, however, Bush seemed to contradict himself by saying at once that the progress of history was not inevitable but that it nonetheless had a course set by God, “the Author of Liberty.” The lines confuse, but it certainly appears Bush thought reality more closely approximated the latter rather than the former:

We go forward with complete confidence in the eventual triumph of freedom, not because history runs on the wheels of inevitability- it is human choices that move events; not because we consider ourselves a chosen nation- God moves and chooses as He wills. We have confidence because freedom is the permanent hope of mankind, the hunger in dark places, the longing of the soul. When our Founders declared a new order of the ages, when soldiers died in wave upon wave for a union based on liberty, when citizens marched in peaceful outrage under the banner ‘Freedom Now,’ they were acting on an ancient hope that is meant to be fulfilled. History has an ebb and flow of justice, but history also has a visible direction, set by liberty and the Author of Liberty.

Bush was often far more direct about the confidence that resulted from the knowledge that in promoting freedom America was doing God’s work. Consider his speech to the national prayer breakfast in 2003 as a fitting example:
We can be confident in America’s cause in the world. Our Nation is dedicated to the equal and undeniable worth of every person. We don’t own the ideals of freedom and human dignity, and sometimes we haven’t always lived up to them. But we do stand for those ideals, and we will defend them.

We believe, as Franklin Roosevelt said, that men and women born to freedom in the image of God will not forever suffer the oppressor’s sword. We are confident that people in every part of the world wish for freedom, not tyranny, prefer peace to terror and violence. And our confidence will not be shaken.

We can also be confident in the ways of providence, even when they are far from our understanding. Events aren’t moved by blind change and chance. Behind all of life and all of history, there’s a dedication and purpose, set by the hand of a just and faithful God. And that hope will never be shaken (Bush 2003c)

Bush’s rhetoric about Iraq was not in any sense limited to this one religious theme. Bush spoke just as often about the sixteen U.N. resolutions Saddam had defied, the threat that weapons of mass destruction posed, the ties between Saddam’s regime and various terrorist organizations and the need for the U.N. to be a meaningful actor, rather than a mere reprise of the neutered League of Nations. Still, religious rhetoric was quite clearly a large part of the case Bush made for expanding the war on terror into other states beyond Afghanistan.

This chapter has documented that Bush’s terrorism rhetoric featured two specific religious themes, a representation of the war on terror as a struggle between good and evil and an identification of the U.S.’s practical interest in the expansion of freedom with God’s own designs. Within each theme, multiple subsidiary religious elements have also been explored, such as the use of light/dark imagery and the expressions of confidence in the eventual outcome of the U.S.’s efforts due to their agreement with God’s will. As I have said repeatedly, Bush
continued to employ these two basic motifs until his very last day in office. In fact, Bush
dedicated his farewell address to some final ruminations about these topics (Bush 2009). Bush,
for a last time, tried to connect freedom to God, remarking, “The battles waged by our troops are
part of a broader struggle between two dramatically different systems. Under one, a small band
of fanatics demands total obedience to an oppressive ideology, condemns women to
subservience, and marks unbelievers for murder. The other system is based on the conviction
that freedom is the universal gift of Almighty God, and that liberty and justice light the path to
peace. This is the belief that gave birth to our Nation. And in the long run, advancing this belief
is the only practical way to protect our citizens.” And, for one last time, Bush returned to his
depiction of the war on terror as an epic struggle between good and evil. “As we address these
challenges and others we cannot foresee tonight, America must maintain our moral clarity. I’ve
often spoken to you about good and evil, and this has made some uncomfortable,” Bush
admitted. “But good and evil are present in this world, and between the two there can be no
compromise. Murdering the innocent to advance an ideology is wrong every time, everywhere.
Freeing people from oppression and despair is eternally right. This Nation must continue to
speak out for justice and truth. We must always be willing to act in their defense and to advance
the cause of peace.” Perhaps no better evidence of Bush’s commitment to message discipline
can be found than his last address, seven long, hard years after the attacks of 9/11.

One of the single most powerful motivations I had when starting to research presidential
religious rhetoric was to determine if Bush’s rhetoric, in particular, had mattered. Did it help his
cause? As a contemporaneous observer of American politics, I had obviously witnessed first-
hand the linguistic choices Bush had made in his policy appeals. I followed the controversy over these choices. Indeed, the introduction includes a collection of criticism attacking Bush for his use of religious rhetoric. Anyone with an interest in American politics would be aware of these objections. As I said earlier, though, I believe all of those critics are operating under the assumption that Bush’s rhetoric had a persuasive effect, that somehow Bush was able to convince individuals, by means of religion, to support policies that maybe they otherwise would not. But I feel the influence of Bush’s religious rhetoric has merely been taken for granted, including by scholars such as Domke (2004) who are willing to ascribe great powers to Bush’s appeals with little hard evidence to support their conclusions. As the following pages I hope will show, I think it is justified to conclude that the import of Bush’s religious language has been greatly overstated.

It is difficult to gauge the impact of Bush’s rhetoric on his personal approval rating. His first major religious speech on September 20, 2001 cannot fairly be considered. Bush was the recipient of a massive rally-round-the-flag boost as his approval shot from 57% on August 16 to 90% on September 21. Obviously that increase had much more to do with the terrorist attacks than it did with Bush’s rhetoric. His other two major addresses, on the first anniversary and at his second inaugural, offer a mixed picture. Bush did witness an uptick in his approval marks after the former address. Bush went from 66% approval to 70% approval between September 5 and September 13, 2002. However, this increase is not enough to meet the 6% benchmark of certain statistical significance. This benchmark was met for Bush’s second inaugural. Bush’s approval was clocked at 57% on February 2, 2005 whereas he registered only 51% approval in
the last poll taken before the ceremony. Still, Bush’s approval rating immediately fell back to 49% on February 7 and then was incredibly steady—51%, 52%, 52% and 52% in the next four readings (Ragsdale 2009, 248-250). Consequently, if Bush’s second inaugural helped him, it did so only weakly.

More doubt about the impact of Bush’s religious rhetoric can be found by means of an examination of issue specific opinion. Charts 8.1, 8.2 and 8.3 track opinions on a series of questions related to the war on terror. Each chart displays the same downward trend from 2003 onward.

In Chart 8.1, respondents were surveyed as to whether they approved or disapproved of Bush’s “handling” of terrorism. At the start of the series, 71% of participants approved of Bush’s performance. By the end of the series, that number had fallen almost 25 points and more Americans now disapproved of Bush’s policies than supported them. Indeed, healthy majorities
also questioned whether the war in Iraq was worthwhile, a fact made plain by Chart 8.2. In this graph, people were asked whether the U.S. made the “right decision or the wrong decision” in using military force in Iraq. At its peak, 74% of respondents felt that the right decision had been made.

Yet by 2005 the pluralities had switched. By December 2007, just 36% of people felt the war in Iraq had been worth it, a precipitous fall of close to 40 percentage points. Finally, Chart 8.3 displays how well people thought the U.S. government was doing in reducing the threat of terrorism. What is clear is that over time fewer and fewer people thought the government was doing “very well” or “fairly well.”
In reality, this selection of data underestimates Bush’s loss of national support. Edwards (2007, 98-113) has a much fuller account. Edwards documents that in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq (roughly between September 2002 and March 2003), despite very concentrated religious rhetoric by Bush, opinion on a possible war did not budge. Indeed, a Pew poll found that between mid-August and the end of October support for military action actually decreased by 9 points. Going forward, support for the war atrophied more quickly than support for the Korean and Vietnam wars had. By August of 2006, 55% of the country felt that the war had made America less safe from terrorism than it had been before and 52% felt that it had distracted the U.S. from other, more pressing tasks in the fight against terror. When it comes to Iraq, it is Edwards’ informed judgment that “In essence, the president did not influence opinion at all” (111).
Bush’s arguments did not change. They were a constant. What did change was the general course of the war on terror. The early operations went almost surprisingly well. The war in Afghanistan was at least initially seen as a stunning success. A multinational force encountered little resistance and suffered few casualties. Fewer than 4,000 American soldiers would see combat. Although the Taliban remained a nuisance in more than a few regions of the country, Afghanistan was for a time relatively peaceful and took some quick steps towards democracy, holding a constitutional convention as soon as 2002. Then, the fighting in Iraq went equally smoothly at first. However, complications developed shortly after the defeat of Hussein’s armies. Poor pre-war planning by the administration led to a confused start to the post-war occupation, where General Jay Garner was in short order replaced by diplomat Paul Bremer as head of the Coalition Provisional Authority. Following Bremer’s ultimately ill-advised decision to disband the Iraqi military and Baathist political party, guerilla organizations sprouted for the purpose of launching attacks on U.S. forces. Other militants flooded into the area for the opportunity to take shots at the American army. And long-simmering conflict between the country’s Sunni and Shia Muslims exploded into sectarian violence. Iraq is predominantly a Shia country, but the Sunnis had been privileged during their co-religionist Hussein’s reign.

This proved to be a toxic brew for America’s troops and prevented any drawdown in the country’s forces. There were only 139 American fatalities during the invasion but the country suffered the loss of over 800 soldiers in 2004, 2005 and 2006. The number of wounded annually averaged four to six times the number of deaths. Costs spiraled out of control. Prior to the war,
administration officials had testified that the war would cost less than $95 billion. In 2006, the cost had already reached four times that, surpassing the $400 billion mark. With signs of failure abounding, Bush doubled down and ordered an unpopular “surge” in troops in early 2007. Bush’s decision was vindicated when the surge helped pacify the country. By 2008 American military causalities had returned to the levels not seen since the invasion (Schier 2009, 125-157).

The opinion in these graphs is therefore much similar to how the public responded to Reagan’s appeals for defense spending; American citizens rationally evaluated both Bush and Reagan’s appeals in the context of their understanding of international affairs. For Bush, religious rhetoric simply could not overpower increasing casualties and political unrest in the Mideast after 2003.

Furthermore, the media coverage of Bush’s religiously infused speeches mirrored the trend of public opinion; as conditions abroad worsened, Bush’s speechifying was increasingly likely to be poorly received.

Bush’s first major religious speech, his address to the nation on September 20, 2001, was for the most part highly praised. As Table 8.1 indicates, the op-ed pieces printed in response were, on average, positive, with a mean score of 3.37. Even Bush’s toughest opponents had hardly a negative word for the President’s performance. Bob Herbert (2001) remarked that Bush had “delivered a near-perfect speech,” that he “got things exactly right,” and that all in all it was a “splendid moment.” Richard Cohen (2001) concurred. Cohen acknowledged that he was previously skeptical of the President. It was Cohen’s take that Bush had been heretofore “occasionally wobbly, somewhat tentative and diminished in stature.” He thought Bush was
unprepared to be president—until that Thursday night. Cohen wrote that Bush’s “words were perfect, occasionally eloquent” and that he was “steadfast,” “determined” and “the master of the moment.” The idea that the events of the past nine days had somehow transformed Bush into something more than he had been was a common one. Many thought Jim Hoagland (2001) correct when he wrote that “the president seemed to me to close this latest chapter of doubt about his leadership abilities with his commanding performance.”

In an unusual occurrence, no commentator took issue with Bush’s religious tones, either, perhaps because this speech blended so seamlessly with the comforting and calming religious rhetoric Bush had been so frequently using at the time. One columnist, Kathleen Parker (2001) actually openly mocked those who expressed concern about Bush’s references to God, his use of the word “crusade” and the naming of “Operation Infinite Justice.” With disgust evident in her words, Parker wrote, “War demands much of a nation’s citizenry, but only in America does war demand sensitivity training.”

About the only dissenting voices in this sample were those of Salim Muwakkil (2001), who rejected Bush’s consideration of military options, and Jeff Madrick (2001), who faulted Bush for the economic aspects of his response to the attacks.

As a final note, it should be said that Bush somewhat surprisingly remains in the background in a lot of these pieces. It seems as if many of the writers were trying to sort through how they personally felt about what had happened to their country. Hence, a great many op-eds were structured around “advice” for the President—things he should or should not do in the future, as opposed to positive or negative commentary on things he was doing or had already
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<tr>
<td>9/26/01</td>
<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>Michael Kelly</td>
<td>“… Pacifist Claptrap”</td>
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<tr>
<td>9/27/01</td>
<td>Los Angeles Times</td>
<td>James Pinkerton</td>
<td>“Nail Down Justice, But Don’t Abandon…”</td>
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<td>New York Times</td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“Nation-Building in Afghanistan”</td>
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<td>Jeff Madrick</td>
<td>“In Responding to Terrorism…”</td>
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<td>George Will</td>
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Dates: 9/21 – 9/27

Average Score: 3.37

Positive Articles: 15 (39.5%)

Negative Articles: 8 (21.1%)

Mixed/Neutral Articles: 15 (39.5%)
done. Writers provided their own perspective on everything from how the U.S. should counter the financial resources of the terrorists (Washington Post 2001) to what America’s goals should be after they defeated the Taliban, despite the war having not even begun yet (Hiatt 2001). The overwhelming absence of Bush’s actions in these editorials accounts for the unusually high percentage (39.5%) of neutral pieces.

For these reasons, the reaction to Bush’s national address on the first anniversary of September 11 may very well be more revealing. Table 8.2 displays the results of these coding efforts. Editorial coverage of Bush’s terrorism policies in the week after this address was surprisingly negative, given the context. The anniversary of 9/11 was a time of renewed national unity as well as a strong reminder of Bush’s fine leadership in the days immediately after the attacks. But this appears to have mattered little; the average op-ed was scored a 2.62 and almost 54% of all pieces were negative in tone.

One thing to bear in mind is that the media was actually responding to two addresses. The first was Bush’s televised speech on the night of the 11th, the second was the aforementioned speech he delivered to the U.N. the next day where he made the case for multilateral action against Iraq. In truth, the second speech did receive more attention. That is not say that Bush’s remarks on the 11th, nor their religious content, went unnoticed, though. In a column appearing in the Los Angeles Times, James Pinkerton (2002) pointed out that Bush’s “moral clarity,” evident in the Ellis Island address, no longer “lined up” with the world’s priorities. “The world has to some extent moved on,” Pinkerton wrote, and the author worried that Bush was losing sight of the bigger picture. “In his speech at Ellis Island on Wednesday night,” Pinkerton
explained, “the president mentioned neither Bin Laden nor Al Qaeda. What was voiced instead were the unmistakable signs of ‘mission creep’- toward war with Iraq, away from the consensus of Americans, even further way from international alliance.” Milton Viorst (2002), on the other hand, had a negative reaction to Bush’s good and evil rhetoric. Viorst noted that there has always been evil in the world, but that does not mean the U.S. always has to do something about it. Viorst argued, “The cold war is a useful precedent. Saddam Hussein’s power, and perhaps his evil too, pale next to that of Stalin. Yet even when we had clear military superiority we chose not to attack him.”

Like most at the time, Viorst agreed with Bush that something needed to be done about Hussein. This was the consensus opinion of the four newspapers’ writers. Even the traditionally liberal *New York Times* (2002) allowed “Mr. Bush’s blunt assessment of the Iraqi threat and the need for a firm, united response… were well put… Betting on the good faith of Saddam Hussein or trusting that the problem will fade away is unrealistic.”

Rather, opposition at this point to Bush’s Iraq policy centered on timing and priorities. Why now? Why Iraq? Frank Rich (2002) concurred that Iraq was a “grave and gathering danger” but still asked “is it as grave a danger as the enemy that attacked America on 9/11 and those states that are its most integral collaborators?” In a point much similar to the one Viorst offered, Rich continued “it’s hard to find any doubter of the war who wants to appease Saddam or denies that he is an evil player. The question many critics are asking is why he has jumped to the head of the most-wanted list when the war on Al Qaeda remains unfinished and our resources are finite. Even those who can stomach pre-emptive war as a new doctrine wonder if we have
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<td>“The Wisdom of Imagining the Worst-Case...”</td>
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<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>Mary McGrory</td>
<td>“Silence About Secrecy”</td>
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<td>Washington Post</td>
<td>Jim Hoagland</td>
<td>“Back and Forth With Bush”</td>
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<td>Washington Post</td>
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<td>“In War, Limitations Have Their Place”</td>
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<td>David Greising</td>
<td>“Bush’s Bipolar Diplomatic Act May Backfire”</td>
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Dates: 9/12 – 9/18

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<td>Negative Articles</td>
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<td>Mixed/Neutral Articles</td>
<td>6 (15.4%)</td>
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our pre-emptive priorities straight.” These critics thus tried to find some explanation for why Bush was, in their minds, in such a hurry to go to war. E.J. Dionne (2002) speculated that electoral considerations were playing a role: “Like it or not, the suspicion would always exist that a war vote was being pushed for political purposes, to influence this fall’s elections and to box Democrats into voting to give Bush what he wants or face charges of ‘softness.’” Several other writers alluded to some psychological compulsion that may have been at work for Bush, an oedipal conflict of sorts with his father the former president. Mary McGrory (2002) acidly called the country’s Iraq policy “the great regime-changing efforts of a son who is trying to complete his father’s unfinished business.” Maureen Dowd (2002) wrote that “Karl Rove and W. have designed a mirror-image presidency. They take everything Poppy did that conservatives regard as a mistake and reverse it. The right thought that the father’s war was too short? O.K., the son’s war will be too long.”

Regardless of whether any of this commentary had merit or not, the important point is that Bush’s religious rhetoric on September 11, 2002 did not guarantee any more positive editorial coverage of the war on terror, despite the emotional circumstances of the week, and despite Bush’s extremely high popularity at the time.

Bush’s third and final major religious speech was his second Inaugural. Again, the address seemed to come at an auspicious time for the President- the beginning of his second term, a fresh start for his Administration. However, the editorialists in all four papers were even more negative about the president’s message than they were in the past. Table 8.3 reveals that 63% of the 27 editorials published in the week after the ceremony were negative in tone and that
the average score of any given essay was 2.15, a mean that is low relative to the standards of other major presidential religious speeches.

We have seen in other speeches throughout this volume that writers are quite often able to separate quality rhetoric, which they tend to like, from its attendant policy ideas, which they sometimes do not. That is exactly what happened in the case of Bush’s second inaugural. Many commentators praised Bush’s vocal expression of lofty ideals while at the same time criticizing his practice of those ideals. E.J. Dionne (2005) was a critic of this address, too. Dionne wrote, “Every American will cheer the president’s repeated references to the U.S. obligation to hold high the torch of freedom” and he granted that he “loved what the president said about our obligations to dissidents around the world.” But, while appreciating Bush’s language, Dionne nonetheless asked “whether the president has been candid about the costs of his all-embracing vision, about how to pay for it and raise the troops to fight for it.” Dionne proceeded to fault Bush for the country’s troubles in Iraq and for continuing to use 9/11 as justification for his “radical” decisions. “Stirring words, alas, cannot mask a flawed policy,” Dionne concluded.

Similarly, the Los Angeles Times (2005) observed that “President Bush stood at the apogee of his life Thursday, and he rose to the occasion.” The paper praised Bush for “eloquently weaving the big themes of his presidency and his life into a coherent philosophy and a bold vision of how he wants this country to spend the next four years.” Yet they, too, worried about what these words might lead to: “It would be good if this country’s foreign policy more closely tracked our professed ideals. It would be disastrous if self-righteous hubris led us into bloody and hopeless crusades, caused us to do terrible things that mock the values we are
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<td>Steve Lopez</td>
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<td>Thomas Friedman</td>
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<td>Ronald Brownstein</td>
<td>“For Democracy to Take Root, It Must Be the Work of Many Hands”</td>
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<td>“Taking Liberty to Revise Famous Speeches”</td>
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<td>David Ignatius</td>
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Dates: 1/21 – 1/27

Average Score: 2.15

Positive Articles: 5 (18.5%)

Negative Articles: 17 (63.0%)

Mixed/Neutral Articles: 5 (18.5%)
supposed to be fighting for, alienated us from an unappreciative world and possibly brought home more of the terrorism our neo-idealism is intended to suppress. There is an illustration of all these risks close to hand.”

The gap between Bush’s rhetoric and the consequences of his policies was perhaps most aptly summarized by Hoagland (2005) as the difference between “leading” and “managing.” Hoagland was of the opinion that the inspiring inaugural address showed that Bush could lead, while the previous four years showed that Bush struggled to manage.

Other detractors chose to instead highlight the incongruence between Bush’s grandiose address and the problems plaguing the country at the time. Lopez (2005) contrasted the scene at the inaugural with the pain being suffered by two mothers who had lost their sons in Iraq. Madigan (2005) drew attention to what individuals struggling to pay their healthcare bills or find work were doing on inauguration day. Milloy (2005) recounted a conversation he had recently had with some inner-city youth about the address. Milloy wrote that “Unlike Bush, those in my group want to see more of that (freedom) spread here at home before the United States goes off trying to change the rest of the world.”

A final set of individuals questioned the sincerity of Bush’s remarks. For instance, Robert Scheer (2005) argued that people who were worried about the policy implications of Bush’s sweeping rhetoric were only wasting their time. The inaugural, Scheer held, was little but a “brilliant” “political marketing device.” “It takes a true demagogue to remorselessly cheapen the lovely word ‘freedom’ by deploying it 27 times in a 21-minute speech, while never admitting that its real-life creation is more complicated than cranking out a batch of Pepsi-Cola
and selling it to the natives with a catchy ‘Feeling Free!’ jingle,” Scheer wrote. Scheer thought that since Bush’s policy towards countries like China and Saudi Arabia was at odds with the address, then Bush simply did not mean what he said. Scheer’s analysis was clear: “As the admen say, never confuse the thing being sold for the thing itself. Bush’s passion for ‘freedom’ extends only as far as it is useful as a political sales pitch.”

For those that were inclined to agree, additional support was found when several Bush officials publicly attempted to scale back the ambitions of the address. Bush’s own father tried to downplay the inaugural’s significance. These moves triggered a flurry of negative press, including a dryly humorous piece by Hanna Rosin (2005) who tried to imagine what it would be like if other historical figures wanted to revise their speeches after the fact (for instance, Moses: “We did talk. But the Lord our God did not specify what he meant by ‘covenant.’ He did not say whether you had to follow one or five or all 10. He could have meant it more like a list of suggestions.”).

In sum, editorial coverage of Bush’s major usages of religious rhetoric on terror is marked by a clear downward trajectory, a fact visible simply in the change in the average score of the three addresses- from 3.37 to 2.62 to 2.15. Again, this pattern makes perfect sense given the increasing difficulties the country’s military faced.

Where Bush had undeniable success in the war on terror, however, was on the floor of Congress. Bush won legislative victories on basically every important issue. In the weeks after the attacks, the Congress passed the PATRIOT Act, a Bush priority, with almost no debate; the legislation was adopted by a 96-1 vote in the Senate. This act increased the government’s
domestic surveillance powers in a number of ways, one of the most notable being the National Security Letter (NSL) provisions that permitted the FBI to search telephone, email and financial records of terrorist suspects without first obtaining a court order. Another provision allowed “sneak and peak searches,” those searches where the subject is not immediately notified. The law also allowed the government to indefinitely detain any alien that the attorney general determined was a risk to launch a terrorist attack. Although the act became rather controversial and sparked a number of court challenges, Bush also persuaded Congress to reauthorize it in 2006.

Bush won the fight over the Department of Homeland Security. Congress was always by and large in favor of creating a new cabinet department for homeland security but it was the President who was at first reluctant. Bush changed course in the summer of 2002 and proposed his own version of a Department of Homeland Security with one key difference from Congress’ earlier proposals. Bush strove to keep the employees of this new agency out of the civil service to create, as he called it, a “flexible personnel system.” This aspect of the plan sparked a fierce debate with Senate Democrats and their union supporters. Still, Bush got what he wanted after the Democrats suffered some close midterm losses in 2002 in races where the fate of Bush’s plan had been made an issue.

In terms of Congressional involvement in the Iraq war, Bush easily carried the vote on a Congressional resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq in October 2002 by margins of 77-23 in the Senate and 296-133 in the House. A new House Democratic majority that took office following the 2006 midterms presented Bush with the stiffest challenge to his terror
policies. The House Democrats made moves to potentially cut off funding for the war or, failing that, to at least include a timetable for withdrawal along with any additional authorizations. Yet, after a series of showdowns, including Bush’s veto of spending bill with a deadline in May, Bush ultimately won funding for the surge, free of a withdrawal timetable, in December of 2007.

It is more than fair to ask how much of Bush’s legislative success was due to his rhetoric, though. Arguably this success could have been anticipated regardless of what argument Bush chose to make for his terror policies. Political scientists have known since Wildavsky (1966) that presidents tend to have the advantage in foreign affairs. Wildavsky posited that there were two separate presidencies. In domestic affairs, the president would often be frustrated and forced to play a role subservient to Congress. Wildavsky held that it required either great crises (like the Depression) or extraordinary Congressional majorities (like Johnson) to get anything significant done. Wildavsky points out that even FDR did not pass a significant piece of legislation after 1938. In contrast, the president was much better positioned to dictate outcomes on foreign affairs. Both Congress and the public expect the president to lead in this arena and he has more formal powers at his disposal. Using an analysis of Congressional voting, Wildavsky found that between 1948 and 1964 Congress enacted 65% of presidents’ foreign policy initiatives versus only 40% of domestic initiatives. Furthermore, in this time period on no major foreign policy issue where a president was serious and determined did the Commander-in-Chief fail.

Since the publication of Wildavsky’s provocative thesis, a vigorous debate has sprung up in the field over whether or not such a phenomenon exists, and, if so, when and for whom (see,
for instance, Canes-Wrone, Howell and Lewis 2008; Edwards 1989; Fleisher and Bond 1988). Robust results are hard to find. Still, it seems very likely that some version of the two presidencies does exist. And if ever there were a good example, it would be President Bush. Bush experienced some domestic successes, chiefly No Child Left Behind and his two tax cuts, but on many domestic issues, namely his highly publicized efforts at Social Security privatization and immigration reform, Bush was ignored by a recalcitrant Congress. In contrast, the evidence is clear that he dominated policy in foreign affairs. This likely would be expected for any president that happened to be sitting in the Oval Office when the country was attacked, regardless of what rhetorical frames that man favored.

Reading some of Bush’s terror speeches can be a painful exercise. They call to mind the awful feelings about 9/11 that everyone is shackled with. Nevertheless, it is hard to deny the powerful expressiveness of much of Bush’s religious rhetoric. Many of these speeches, in particular Bush’s second inaugural, verged on the sublime. They were unexpected speeches, too, given their source, a man known far more for verbal gaffes and blunders than he was for eloquence. And, indeed, it may very well have proved soothing to the American public to hear a president talk so certainly of good and evil and of God and his plan for America. Many people were adrift after 9/11. They struggled to get a grasp on the dark and dangerous new world they saw outside their windows. Bush’s language probably helped some of us find our moorings. He promised there was order to a disordered world.

Yet, it is possible to admire Bush’s oratory and its potential civic value while at the same time questioning its instrumental value. There is little evidence to suggest that Bush’s religious
rhetoric produced any added benefit for the president. Public opinion quickly and decisively turned against Bush’s handling of the war on terror. Far from the “echoing” press that Domke (2004) alleges, the media also grew increasingly hostile toward the president, religious rhetoric aside. Finally, Bush did experience great success in Congress but one would be hard pressed to attribute that to language rather than the president’s unique position in the American system as Commander-in-Chief. Perhaps the most persuasive point that casts doubt on the impact of Bush’s religious rhetoric is this thought experiment. Imagine that Bush never once mentioned good and evil nor God. Would anything have been any different?
Chapter 9

All God’s Children: John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson’s Religious Rhetoric on Civil Rights

John Kennedy was a reluctant advocate for civil rights as he was late to fully comprehend the gravity of America’s racial injustices. Growing up only infrequently did Kennedy interact with black individuals. Kennedy confidant Arthur Krock once admitted that he “never saw a Negro on level social terms with the Kennedys. And I never heard the subject mentioned” (Giglio 1991, 173). Ben Bradlee, former editor of the Washington Post, was willing to bet that prior to his 1960 presidential campaign, “he (Kennedy) had never met a black person in his life.” Bradlee continued, “I didn’t- and I was on the WASP side of the same street- meet a black till I was sixteen. I think that Bobby (Kennedy)- St. Francis- felt that there was deep moral inequity, and I don’t think that Jack felt that instinctively” (Strober and Strober 2003, 287-288).

As unlikely as Bradlee’s theory may seem, there may have been a grain of truth to it. In addition to his privileged and insular upbringing, Kennedy had launched his political career in a state, Massachusetts, that lacked a sizable African-American population. And, further, his national aspirations had made him unduly sensitive to the Southern perspective. Kennedy, for instance, would vote for the Southern jury trial amendment to the Civil Rights Act of 1957. He was also a vocal critic of Eisenhower’s use of federal troops to integrate the Little Rock school system in 1957. So perhaps it is unsurprising that during that 1960 campaign Kennedy reportedly asked Jackie Robinson, the color-barrier breaking Dodgers second baseman, “Mr. Robinson, I don’t know any Negroes. Would you introduce me to some?” (278).
In addition to lacking a natural passion for civil rights, upon becoming president Kennedy recognized that taking a strong stand on the issue had little to offer him politically.

To start, Kennedy’s victory was extraordinarily close. He bested Nixon in the popular vote by a count of just 118,574 out of 68,837,000 total. His margin of victory was the smallest since Grover Cleveland’s 23,000 vote squeaker over James G. Blaine in 1884. When combined with accusations of voting fraud in Illinois and Texas, Kennedy was on shaky ground from day one. He had no mandate for action on any issue, let alone civil rights.

Second, Kennedy was confronted with a powerful conservative coalition that had the potential to frustrate a liberal agenda. After the 1960 election, the coalition included 285 of 437 House members and 59 of 100 Senators. Southern Democrats also headed twelve of twenty House committees and ten of sixteen Senate committees (Giglio 1991, 39). Given that on any nondefense issue Republican support could be expected to be minimal, Kennedy typically faced the challenge of persuading more than 50 conservative Southern Democrats in the House to vote for his bill, presuming he could even get it to the floor in the first place (O’Brien 2009, 133). These dynamics created a strong incentive for Kennedy to steer clear of divisive civil rights policies that could antagonize the Southern wing of his party.

The number problems were exacerbated by Kennedy’s natural ineffectiveness when it came to dealing with Congress (see Giglio 1991, 40-41). During his time in the House and Senate, JFK had been aloof and formed few close friendships—friendships that would have been of great value to him later as president (consider the difference to Lyndon Johnson). Kennedy
was afraid to push Congress too hard on any matter, lest it jeopardize his other proposals. He instead favored reason over arm twisting. If that approach failed, he let it be.

Further, Kennedy, like many other U.S. executives, was more inclined to devote his time to foreign affairs as opposed to domestic ones anyways. As Kennedy once confided to Richard Nixon (another president who would preference his international responsibilities), “It really is true that foreign affairs is the only important issue for a president to handle, isn’t it? I mean, who gives a shit if the minimum wage is $1.15 or $1.25…?” (Isserman and Kazin 2004, 47).

Finally, opinion on civil rights was divided, at least at the start of Kennedy’s term. One of Kennedy’s common refrains was “Why fight if you are not sure to win?” (Reston 1966, 228). On civil rights, Kennedy seemed sure to lose, making him very unlikely to want to fight. His deputy attorney general Nicholas Katzenbach summed up Kennedy’s initial position precisely:

There were times that civil rights issues preoccupied the president. The problems were hard to resolve and certainly occupied a great deal of Bobby’s time. Therefore the president spent more time on them, and they would talk a great deal about an issue that was on Bobby’s mind. Yet I think other things were far more important. He was really interested in foreign policy and wanted to be involved in it. This caused problems with State; he wanted to be his own secretary of state.

He was always conscious of the closeness of the election, I always thought too conscious. He didn’t feel he had a mandate, didn’t feel he would succeed. In truth he didn’t like working with Congress, even though he was a former senator and congressman. That’s why he had Larry O’Brien, as opposed to LBJ, who reveled in working with Congress. Kennedy was inhibited about civil rights; he had all these demons going - the sit-ins, Meredith, Wallace. He wanted to get other things done (Strober and Strober 2003, 276-277).

As a consequence, Kennedy first favored a strategy of executive, and not Congressional, action on civil rights. Over the first two and a quarter years of his administration, Kennedy’s
Justice Department would file forty two lawsuits in support of black voting rights (Dallek 2003, 591). He issued an order to create the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. Chaired by Vice President Johnson, the PCEEO had the power to conduct investigations and terminate government contracts if discrimination was found in its business partners. Moreover, Kennedy placed a high priority on appointing minorities to significant government positions. He appointed over forty African-Americans to important posts and he nominated five black federal judges, including Thurgood Marshall. Marshall, who was nominated for the Second Circuit Court of Appeals, was a hero to the African-American community because of his role as counsel in the Brown vs. Board of Education school desegregation case (Giglio 1991, 177).12

Yet even in these smaller gestures, Kennedy was wary. During his presidential campaign, he had promised to end discrimination in federally financed public housing with the “stroke of the presidential pen.” Once in office, though, Kennedy equivocated. The new President worried that such an order could weaken the chances that Congress would approve his proposed Department of Urban Affairs, an agency that he planned to appoint Robert Weaver to head as the first black cabinet member. In 1962, the order was postponed again due to concerns about the fallout it might produce before the midterm elections. A limited order would not be announced until Thanksgiving. In the interim, the White House had been inundated with pens mailed by constituents angry that Kennedy had been reneging on his promise.

12 Even so, the impact of these appointments was somewhat nullified by the good many segregationists Kennedy also appointed to the bench in the South (Dallek 2003, 493-494, 590-591).
The history of Kennedy’s administration, however, is a timeline of tactics like the “Ink for Jack” drive. It is a timeline of increasing pressure on JFK—pressure that would force him to eventually take more assertive action. The Freedom Rides. The sit-ins. The riots over James Meredith’s enrollment at Ole Miss in 1962. That kind of pressure would at last reach a critical mass in the spring of 1963. After events in Alabama, appointments and executive orders could no longer suffice.

At the beginning of 1963, Kennedy still believed that proposing a comprehensive civil rights program would be a grievous error (O’Brien 2009, 158-159). The President held out hope that Congress might pass his tax, education and healthcare bills (it would not) and he felt he needed to be on good terms with the Southern Democrats in order to do so. In February, Kennedy called for action on civil rights in a message to Congress but he failed to follow through with specific desegregation proposals. Kennedy also refused to back a movement to reform Rule XXII by reducing the threshold for ending a filibuster from two-thirds to three-fifths. This reform was viewed as instrumental to the cause of civil rights, an issue where filibusters were commonplace. In April, Kennedy took some additional heat for his rejection of a Civil Rights Commission recommendation that Mississippi’s federal funding be cancelled until it complied with court orders mandating protection for black citizens. But that same month circumstances were about to change.

In April, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference kicked off a campaign against segregation in Birmingham, Alabama, one of the most racist cities in the entire South. Birmingham had earned its reputation in large measure due to the repressive
police tactics of the city’s commissioner, Eugene “Bull” Connor. Connor’s forces were intertwined with the Klan and together they made life miserable for local minorities. On the day after Connor lost the city’s mayoral election, King began his protest, demanding an end to discrimination in hiring by local businesses and government and the desegregation of public facilities. On Good Friday, April 12, King was arrested for leading a march. It was while in solitary confinement that he wrote his famous “Letter from the Birmingham Jail,” a potent disquisition on civil disobedience.

Tensions in Birmingham escalated following King’s release. At the start of May, crowds of peaceful black demonstrators, many of whom were children, were violently attacked by Connor’s troopers. Connor used aggressive police dogs, nightsticks and high pressure fire hoses to scatter the marchers. These images, of dog bites and of people being knocked down by torrents of water, headlined news reports across the country. Upon seeing pictures of the chaos, Kennedy said they made him feel “sick.” (Dallek 2003, 594).

In the near term, the administration was able to help negotiate a settlement to the standoff in Birmingham. In a compromise, the SCLC won an agreement where a variety of facilities, such as lunch counters, fitting rooms and drinking fountains, would be immediately desegregated, blacks would be appointed to a number of white-collar jobs and a committee would be established to deal with future racial problems. The ensuing calm would be short-lived, though; on May 11, bombs were set at the home of King’s brother and at the hotel King stayed at while in town. The city’s black community responded with a four hour riot.
Alabama’s governor, George Wallace, was only making matters worse. Wallace, who had been elected on a pledge to defend segregation now and forever, was loudly opposing district court orders to desegregate the University of Alabama, the last segregated state university in the entire country. He planned to block the “school house” door himself if need be. King’s explicit goal in Birmingham had been to “create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation” (Giglio 1991, 191). The imbroglio with Wallace was merely the latest evidence that this scenario had come to fruition. In the ten weeks after the settlement, officials counted 758 racial demonstrations and 14,733 arrests in 186 cities (Branch 1988, 825). A survey by the attorney general had estimated that as many as thirty Southern cities were at risk of heavy violence over the course of the summer (Dallek 2003, 599).

Kennedy was acutely aware of the peril facing the country. He told one associate, “It’s (unrest) going to be up North… This isn’t any more just a Southern matter… It’s Philadelphia and it’s going to be Washington, D.C., this summer, and we’re trying to figure out what we can do to put this stuff in the courts and get it off the street because somebody’s going to get killed” (Dallek 2003, 601). And so, on June 3, newspapers reported that Kennedy was prepared to ask Congress for a major civil rights law. Kennedy knew full well he was risking his presidency in the process. He told King in June, “We’re in this up to the neck. The worst trouble of all would be to lose the fight in Congress… A good many programs I care about may go down the drain as a result of this- We may all go down the drain…” (Giglio 1991, 196).

Hence, yet again we encounter evidence of a president turning to religious rhetoric in a time of crisis. This crisis, unfolding in riots and street violence, was more visible than most. For
Kennedy, the decision to embrace religious language was an intrinsically troublesome one because of his distinctive identity as a Catholic politician in 1960s America. It is ironic, though, that Kennedy’s faith would cause him so many difficulties since, as his wife Jackie once said, “I think it is unfair for Jack to be opposed because he is a Catholic. After all, he’s such a poor Catholic. Now if it were Bobby: he never misses mass and prays all the time” (Carty 2004, 4).

Jackie was wrong in insinuating that her husband did not attend mass nor pray. He did do these things, and he did them with regularity. Kennedy’s mother, Rose, had done her best to raise John within the Catholic tradition. Rose was an extremely pious woman who attended mass daily and developed close relationships with figures within her church. She desperately wanted her children to follow her example. Rose dragged them all to mass every Sunday, demanded that they say grace before every meal, oversaw their nightly prayers and reviewed their catechism lessons each week (Smith 2006, 260). Over the course of his adult life, John maintained his boyhood commitment to Catholic ritual, even to the point of fasting during Lent and attending confession.

But in a wider sense, Jackie was, indeed, right about her husband’s failings as a Catholic. Kennedy’s faith was only a shallow one. From a young age, Jack had sparred with his mother over her devotion to church doctrine. In a letter he sent to her while serving in World War II, Kennedy wrote, “It is good to know that all nuns and priests along the Atlantic Coast are putting in a lot of praying time on my behalf [but] I hope it won’t be taken [as] a sign of lack of confidence in you all or the Church if I continue to duck” (Carty 2009, 285-286). John’s time at Harvard had caused him to see Catholicism as anti-intellectual and maybe a bit naïve. As his
sister Eunice perceptively noted, “he was always a little less convinced about some (religious) things than the rest of us” (Smith 2006, 260).

Kennedy not only questioned Catholic teachings in theory, he apparently felt little obligation to abide by them in practice. At his brother Ted’s wedding in 1958, Kennedy was caught on tape whispering to the groom that “being married didn’t really mean that you had to be faithful to your wife” (Dallek 2003, 195). That was one belief that we can be sure Kennedy had no doubts about. JFK had an insatiable appetite for women. While in the White House, Kennedy carried on affairs with a multitude of women, including Jackie’s press secretary, Pamela Turnure, Judith Campbell Exner, the sometime girlfriend of Chicago mob boss Sam Giancana, Mary Pinchot Meyer and a variety of lower level secretaries and interns- to say nothing of his rumored relationship with the actress Marilynn Monroe. Trysts with various call girls were also from time to time arranged for Kennedy by his staff (475-480).

Politically, Kennedy’s relationship to Catholicism was equally complex. As an up and coming Representative from a heavily Catholic district in Massachusetts, Kennedy initially emerged as a vocal defender of Catholic interests. Jack fought for federally funded school busing and medical care, successfully so when he helped defeat two bills in 1950 that would have prevented such aid from going to parochial schools. For his work, the Catholic newspaper Sign called Kennedy “a Galahad in the House.” Such outlets were equally pleased by his votes on international affairs. Kennedy’s foreign policy record was one of consistent to support for Catholic countries fighting communist insurrections. As such, he defended Sen. Joe McCarthy’s
communist witch hunts as well. McCarthy, a Catholic himself, at first enjoyed the strong backing of his co-religionists (Carty 2009, 288-289).

As Kennedy became a candidate for national office, however, he started to steadily downplay his support for Catholic causes. He now stated his opposition to federal aid to parochial schools and he changed his stance on the question of whether the U.S. should appoint an ambassador to the Vatican, both reversals of his previous record (Smith 2006, 267).

Kennedy had good reason to tread lightly when it came to religion if he wanted to be president. Despite the passage of thirty years since Al Smith’s Catholic candidacy in 1928, many Americans continued to be deeply suspicious of the prospect of a Catholic president. One of their main paranoias was that the President would first be loyal to Rome, and only second to the United States. An old joke went that when Smith lost that 1928 contest he sent the Pope a one word telegram reading “Unpack!” Some still felt this too true to be truly funny.

Kennedy certainly faced a great deal of bigotry during his run for the White House in 1960. A survey of several pamphlets that were distributed to voters that year proves as much. One in Boston warned that a Catholic would be obligated to appoint only Catholics to his cabinet. “Within one four-year term as President, America would be under full Catholic control,” the writer warned. “The Pope wants rich America under Catholic control. All other Catholic-controlled countries are poor, and always have been.” For others, a Catholic president would be as bad as any of history’s brutal dictators. A writer in Wisconsin argued, “A Catholic president? No, I’m sorry. It would be like voting for a Fascist, a Nazi, in one respect.” Another author in Pennsylvania also made the Fascist connection: “The Roman Catholic Hierarchy is
conducting a massive campaign to hide its true doctrines, and to gain public sympathy. It is using the doctrine of the ‘Big Lie,’ employed so successfully by Hitler and Stalin.” These documents were filled with wild conspiracy theories about various plots to overthrow the American government. One asked if readers knew “that the Roman papal hierarchy is an enemy to our American government, and an enemy in disguise, in that it is a corrupt foreign political machine operating under the mask of religion” and “that a Roman Catholic president in the White House is the next step planned by the hierarchy of enthroned cardinals, bishops and priests” (Balmer 2008, 19-22). These views were not just the province of extremists. In a moderated form, some of the same points would be made in bestselling books by author Paul Blanchard.

Kennedy originally hoped that he had retired the “religion issue” with his decisive victory over challenger Hubert Humphrey in the West Virginia Democratic primary in May 1960. After all, only 4 percent of West Virginians were Catholic. But religion still continued to be an albatross around Kennedy’s neck. After a group of 150 Protestant ministers led by celebrity preacher Norman Vincent Peale issued a public statement in early September questioning any Catholic’s fitness for the presidency, Kennedy decided to forcefully respond. Before a somewhat hostile audience of the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on September 12, Kennedy gave a feisty speech on the subject of the separation of church and state (Kennedy 1960). Kennedy began by pointing out that his religion was obscuring the “far more critical issues… in the 1960 election; the spread of Communist influence, until it now festers 90 miles off the coast of Florida- the humiliating treatment of our President and Vice President by those
who no longer respect our power- the hungry children… in West Virginia, the old people who cannot pay their doctor bills, the families forced to give up their farms- an America with too many slums, with too few schools, and too late to the moon and outer space.” Kennedy argued that it was these issues, not feelings about Roman Catholicism, that should decide the election. In a somewhat begrudging manner, though, he also acknowledged that he needed to yet again explain what kind of role his faith would play in a potential Kennedy administration. The candidate said, “I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute-where no Catholic prelate would tell the President, should he be Catholic, how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote- where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference- and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the President who might appoint him or the people who might elect him.” Kennedy reminded the ministers that when he and his brother fought in World War II, “No one suggested then that we might have a ‘divided loyalty,’ that we did ‘not believe in liberty’ or that we belonged to a disloyal group that threatened the ‘freedoms for which our forefathers died.’” And, in concluding, he warned them, “if this election is decided on the basis that 40 million Americans lost their chance of being President on the day they were baptized, then it is the whole Nation that will be the loser, in the eyes of Catholics and non-Catholics around the world, in the eyes of history, and in the eyes of our own people.” These were strong and powerful remarks.

Ultimately it is unclear whether Kennedy’s campaign was helped or hurt by his religion. On the one hand, Kennedy only carried 34% of the white Protestant vote- the same amount that
Adlai Stevenson had received in 1956 in an election in which he was trounced 57% to 42% by Eisenhower. On the other hand, Kennedy won 83% of the Catholic vote, whereas Stevenson won just 45%. Given that Protestants greatly outnumbered Catholics, these trends made for an exceptionally close popular vote, closer than it probably should have been. Nevertheless, Kennedy’s Catholicism may have made the difference in states with sizable Catholic populations like New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio (Casey 200-201). And, of course, winning states, not votes, is what counts in the Electoral College.

Regardless, the legacy of the 1960 campaign is that Kennedy, much like Jimmy Carter, had to be cautious when it came to religion. So, Kennedy backed up his Houston speech with his actions as president. When it came to questions with religious implications, like school funding, his approach was one of studied and careful neutrality. Taking Kennedy’s situation into account, then, it is logical that his standard rhetoric would not be marked much by religion. For sure Kennedy would reference the Bible on occasion in his public remarks. Yet these would be academic style references. The Bible was a source of wisdom for the learned Kennedy, just like Shakespeare (“Having this bill signed without them here is somewhat like having Hamlet played without the Prince, but we will go ahead anyway”) or ancient Chinese proverbs (“According to the ancient Chinese proverb, ‘A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step’) or Greek mythology (“Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident or miscalculation or by madness”) or philosophers like Francis Bacon (“If we put our power and wealth, and capacity and courage and determination, to the single-minded service of freedom,
then I believe with Francis Bacon ‘that there is hope enough and to spare, not only to make a bold man try, but also to make a sober-minded and wise man believe’”) (Kennedy 1961b; Kennedy 1963g; Kennedy 1961c; Kennedy 1961a). The Bible was not typically part of his larger rhetorical strategy.

Fundamentally, that is what makes the story of civil rights different. Every single account acknowledges Kennedy’s religious rhetoric in his televised speech on June 11, the day of the showdown at Alabama. Yet almost no history or analysis considers what Kennedy said in the days before or after. In truth, Kennedy began to use religious rhetoric on civil rights a few days in advance of his national address.

On the 9th, Kennedy spoke to the United States Conference of Mayors in Honolulu (Kennedy 1963b). Kennedy devoted his entire address to the “problem of race relations,” as he called it. At several points JFK argued that the ultimate responsibility for better race relations rested with the mayors, and not the federal government. Indeed, Kennedy suggested several concrete steps (i.e. the establishment of biracial committees, the enactment of local equal opportunity ordinances, etc.) that the civic leaders in attendance should take. Yet, Kennedy also made a plea for his forthcoming legislative proposals. “What we can do is seek through legislation and Executive action to provide peaceful remedies for the grievances which set them off, to give all Americans, in short, a fair chance for an equal life,” Kennedy said. “I would hope that every mayor here would recognize the assistance they would be provided by those legislative proposals which would help move these disputes off the streets and into the courts, erase all doubts as to the validity of conflicting legal documents, doctrines, and arguments,
require all merchants in all cities at the same time to take the same action, so that none will hang
back for fear of being first, or being penalized for moving out in advance of his competitors and,
finally, to meet the rising tide of discontent with nationwide, appropriate action, without waiting
for city-by-city or store-by-store or case-by-case solutions. Such legislation is, therefore, in your
interest, and I hope will have your support.”

The reasons why the mayors should support strong action on civil rights were spelled out
gradually. For one, Kennedy pointed out “the cause is just.” Later, Kennedy approvingly quoted
a Southern mayor who had attacked segregation as un-Christian. “Yesterday I read where Mayor
David Schenck of Greensboro- and this is a story in the New York Times- appealed to all of the
businessmen of the community in North Carolina and said, ‘I say to you who own and operate
places of public accommodation in the city, the hotels, motels and restaurants, that now is the
time to throw aside the shackles of past customs. Selection of customers purely by race is
outdated, morally unjust, and not in keeping with either democratic or Christian philosophy.’ So
spoke the Mayor of Greensboro, N.C. and I think it is good advice for all of us,” said the
President. Last, in closing, Kennedy claimed that “Justice cannot wait for too many meetings”
because “We face a moment of moral and constitutional crisis, and men of generosity and vision
must make themselves heard in every section of this country.” So, Kennedy was already
beginning to lay out a moral and religious rationale for civil rights even prior to his national
address.

In fact, the very next day Kennedy would again use religious rhetoric to campaign for
civil rights in a commencement address he delivered to the graduates of American University
back in Washington, DC (Kennedy 1963c). This is a well-known address for other reasons. The subject of the speech was actually world peace. On this occasion, Kennedy made the case for improved Soviet-U.S. relations and, in particular, for the adoption of a treaty banning nuclear testing. Kennedy had decided as early as May to use the American graduation ceremonies as his forum for presenting these ideas. The President wanted his olive branch to precede a Chinese-Soviet summit scheduled for July where China might be expected to pressure Khrushchev into rejecting any deals with Kennedy. Kennedy knew that his softer tone would upset the hardliners in his own administration so the text was mostly drafted in secrecy. Influential figures like Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and Secretary of State Dean Rusk did not even learn of it until June 8 when the President had already departed for his brief speaking tour. Today, nothing Kennedy said seems all that controversial. But, in 1963, praising the Soviets for their “many achievements- in science and space, in economic and industrial growth, in culture and in acts of courage” certainly was.

Historical commentary on this speech mostly overlooks, however, the very important comments Kennedy made about civil rights at American. The discussion of civil rights in a foreign policy address was more than appropriate since Kennedy incessantly worried about how racial violence in the U.S. could be exploited by the Soviet propagandists. Hence, Kennedy told the graduates,

Finally, my fellow Americans, let us examine our attitude toward peace and freedom here at home. The quality and spirit of our own society must justify and support our efforts abroad. We must show it in the dedication of our own lives- as many of you who are graduating today will have a unique opportunity to do, by serving without pay in the Peace Corps abroad or in the proposed National Service Corps here at home.
But wherever we are, we must all, in our daily lives, live up to the age-old faith that peace and freedom walk together. In too many of our cities today, the peace is not secure because freedom is incomplete.

It is the responsibility of the executive branch at all levels of government—local, State, and National— to provide and protect that freedom for all of our citizens by all means within their authority. It is the responsibility of the legislative branch at all levels, wherever that authority is not now adequate, to make it adequate. And it is the responsibility of all citizens in all sections of this country to respect the rights of all others and to respect the law of the land.

All this is not unrelated to world peace. “When a man’s ways please the Lord,” the Scriptures tell us, “he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him.” And is not peace, in the last analysis, basically a matter of human rights—the right to live out our lives without fear of devastation—the right to breathe air as nature provided it—the right of future generations to a healthy existence?

While we proceed to safeguard our national interests, let us also safeguard human interests.

The audience obviously was being cued to think of what had been happening in places like Birmingham when Kennedy said that in too many cities “peace is not secure because freedom is incomplete.” Kennedy strongly claimed that the branches of government, and the people, had a responsibility to change this state of affairs. What is important to note is that Kennedy then made a religious argument, based on Proverbs 16: 7, that if each of these actors were to fight for equality, God might respond by removing the Soviet threat (“‘When a man’s ways please the Lord,’ the Scriptures tell us, ‘he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him.’”). The inverse of Kennedy’s point, of course, was that America’s current treatment of its black citizens was displeasing to the Lord, too.
Kennedy had resisted making a major address on civil rights for some time. In May, a reporter had asked him if he thought such an address might “serve a constructive purpose.” Kennedy answered, “If I thought it would I would give one… But I made a speech the night of Mississippi- at Oxford- to the citizens of Mississippi and others. That did not seem to do much good…” (Kennedy 1963a). Kennedy abruptly changed his mind about the matter. In the midst of the conflict with George Wallace on the 11th, Kennedy received news of violent attacks on black protestors in Danville, Virginia. Police brutality had hospitalized forty eight of the sixty five demonstrators. Martin Luther King telegrammed Kennedy about the incident, begging him to seek a “just and moral” solution to the crisis. “I ask you in the name of decency and Christian brotherhood to creatively grapple with Danville’s and the nation’s most grievous problem,” King wrote. Whether because of King’s urging, or because of the Administration’s success in forcing Wallace to capitulate, Kennedy suddenly decided to go on television that night to announce his civil rights legislation. Almost all of his advisors were against the idea, some for political reasons, other for practical ones; Ted Sorenson was given only two hours to write a draft. Kennedy ultimately would deliver a good part of his address off the top of his head- an astounding fact given the magnitude of the occasion (Branch 1988, 822-824; Dallek 2003, 603-604).

If the timing was not influenced by King, the message certainly was (Kennedy 1963d). Kennedy actively used religious rhetoric to advocate for civil rights as the entire country watched. Kennedy first quickly informed the public that the standoff at the University of Alabama had been peacefully resolved. Then he said, “I hope that every American, regardless of
where he lives, will stop and examine his conscience about this and other related incidents.” Kennedy reminded his fellow Americans that they were committed to promoting the rights of oppressed peoples worldwide, so then “it ought to be possible” for students to attend college without the backing of the military, for consumers to have equal access to public accommodations, for voters to cast their ballot without interference. This phrase, “it ought to be possible” was repeated several times. But, Kennedy pointed out, these things were not possible, and discrimination existed not just in the South but “in every city, in every State of the Union.” Consequently, the country was not confronted with a partisan or legal issue, but instead a “moral issue.” Memorably, Kennedy claimed, “We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution. The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated. If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who represent him, if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay?” The reference to the issue being as “old as the scriptures” appears, based on context, to be a reference to the Golden Rule. Kennedy does follow this line by asking “whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated.”
A little further into the address, Kennedy again reiterated the moral dimension of the civil rights struggle: “We face, therefore, a moral crisis as a country and as a people. It cannot be met by repressive police action. It cannot be left to increased demonstrations in the streets. It cannot be quieted by token moves or talk. It is a time to act in the Congress, in your State and local legislative body and, above all, in all of our daily lives. It is not enough to pin the blame on others, to say this is a problem of one section of the country or another, or deplore the fact that we face. A great change is at hand, and our task, our obligation, is to make that revolution, that change, peaceful and constructive for all. Those who do nothing are inviting shame as well as violence. Those who act boldly are recognizing right as well as reality.”

Kennedy’s mentions of conscience, of right, of Scripture, of morality, were profoundly religious and profoundly moving. King, after watching the speech, once more telegraphed Kennedy, this time to say, “I have just listened to your speech to the nation. It was one of the most eloquent, profound and unequivocal pleas for justice and the freedom of all men ever made by any president. You spoke passionately to the moral issues involved in the integration struggle” (Branch 1988, 824). Kennedy’s proposal, outlined in his address, would ban discrimination in public accommodations like hotels, restaurants and stores and it would expand the powers of the Attorney General to enforce school desegregation orders, among other protections. Kennedy, tragically, would not have much time left on this earth to fight for these policies. But, in that short time, he would periodically restate these religious arguments for them.
In his special message to Congress on June 19, for example, Kennedy based much of his petition on religious themes (Kennedy 1963e). In the first line, Kennedy wrote “Last week I addressed to the American people an appeal to conscience—a request for their cooperation in meeting the growing moral crisis in American race relations.” At another point, he termed racial discrimination “evil.” At another, he observed that “religious leaders… recognize the conflict between racial bigotry and the Holy Word.” And in closing, Kennedy asked for legislators to search within their “hearts” so that they might realize their responsibility to spread the “blessings of liberty,” which was the only “right” thing to do: “I therefore ask every member of Congress to set aside sectional and political ties, and to look at this issue from the viewpoint of the Nation. I ask you to look into your hearts— not in search of charity, for the Negro neither wants nor needs condescension— but for the one plain, proud and priceless quality that unites us all as Americans: a sense of justice. In this year of the Emancipation Centennial, justice requires us to insure the blessings of liberty for all Americans and their posterity— not merely for reasons of economic efficiency, world diplomacy and domestic tranquility— but, above all, because it is right.”

Another important example of instrumental religious rhetoric would be Kennedy’s proclamation announcing a national day of prayer on October 8 (Kennedy 1963h). The day of prayer was tradition, authorized by Congress via a joint resolution in April 1952. However, Kennedy chose to direct the purpose of this year’s day to supporting the civil rights struggle. The main body of the text read, “On this day, let us acknowledge anew our reliance upon the divine Providence which guided our founding fathers. Let each of us, according to his own custom and his own faith, give thanks to his Creator for the divine assistance which has nurtured
the noble ideals in which this Nation was conceived. Most especially, let us humbly
acknowledge that we have not yet succeeded in obtaining for all of our people the blessings of
liberty to which all are entitled. On this day, in this year, as we concede these shortcomings, let
each of us pray that through our failures we may derive the wisdom, the courage, and the
strength to secure for every one of our citizens the full measure of dignity, freedom, and
brotherhood for which all men are qualified by their common fatherhood under God.” The
President’s request was directly quoted in the AP story on the proclamation, which also reported
that he planned to attend services on the day of prayer as well (see, i.e. *New York Times* 1963e).
Like George H.W. Bush, Kennedy had thus elected to turn a generic spiritual exercise into a
vehicle which might advance his legislative agenda.

Over the course of the weeks lasting from June to October, Kennedy would occasionally
use religious rhetoric in very small doses, such as when he told a dinner hosted by the Italian
president in July, “Of great importance today, we are trying to erase for all time the injustices
and inequalities of race and color in order to assure all Americans a fair chance to fulfill their
lives and their opportunity as Americans, and as equal children of God. I can neither conceal nor
accept the discrimination now suffered by our Negro citizens in many parts of the country; and I
am determined to obtain both public and private action to end it” (Kennedy 1963f). But more
often Kennedy was working behind the scenes, sometimes deputizing religious leaders to spread
the gospel for him. On June 17, Kennedy met with around 250 religious leaders at the White
House. Summing up his advice to them, Kennedy told the preachers, “I would hope each
religious group would… underscore the moral position of racial equality” (O’Brien 2009, 162).
Many of them would do this. But after Kennedy’s tragic assassination in November, it would be left to Lyndon Johnson to carry on the crusade for civil rights. And, as it was, Johnson’s religious rhetoric would make Kennedy’s look timid by comparison.

Part II

Lyndon Johnson had traveled a unique religious road. His grandfather, Sam, was a Christadelphian, an obscure sect that was brought to America in 1848 by English physician John Thomas. The Christadelphians reject an institutional structure for their church, with services being led by laypeople, and believers are encouraged to separate themselves from the world (Woods 2006, 11-12). Some of Lyndon’s family, including occasionally his father, followed his grandfather’s suit. In contrast, Lyndon’s mother, Rebekah, was a conventionally devout Baptist. Neither path suited Lyndon. When he was fifteen Lyndon joined the Disciples of Christ church. Perhaps his affection for a girl played a role in the decision, but in a deeper sense Johnson had been repelled by the harsh sermons of his mother’s Baptist ministers, “real hell fire and damnation stuff,” as he later described it. The gentler approach of the Disciples appealed to him (41).

Nevertheless Johnson would be forever nomadic in his practices. His wife, Lady Bird, was an Episcopalian so he sometimes joined her in worship. Later in Johnson’s time in office, he would be increasingly attracted to the teachings of Roman Catholicism; Johnson’s daughter, Luci, was a convert. Over the course of his final years, Johnson would from time to time visit the Catholic mission in Stonewall, TX and pray in the chapel at Saint Dominic’s in DC at the end of a trying day. In anguish over Vietnam, Johnson was known to attend as many as three
different Sunday services during the darkest times of the war (799). When asked by an aide why he could not just pick one sect and stick to it, Johnson gave an Eisenhowerish, and not entirely convincing, response: “They all worship God, and just maybe by my attendance at different denominations, I will encourage others to attend the church of their choice” (Watson 2004, 132).

Rather, in his own way, Johnson seemed to be struggling with some of life’s most profound questions. In an oral history interview with the staff of the Johnson Library, Billy Graham, a man who had ministered often to the President, paints a picture of an anguished follower (Transcript). “I think that he had a conflict within him about religion,” Graham said. “He knew what it meant to be saved or lost, using our terminology, and he knew what it was to be born again. And yet he somehow felt that he had never quite had that experience. I think he tried to make up for it by having many of the outward forms of religion, in the sense of going to church almost fanatically, while he was president even.” On the one hand, Graham describes Johnson as a sincere Christian, a man who liked to have the Bible read to him, who would join Graham on his knees in prayer and who loved to discuss the old sermons of his great-grandfather. But on the other, Graham admits that part of Johnson’s interest in religion was “political in this sense, I think he thought more about what the Baptist Standard said in Texas than the Dallas Morning News.”

Reflecting these spiritual cross-currents, when it came to religion, Johnson rarely decided to actually walk the walk. At times, Johnson’s conduct as president was abhorrent. Though it has been less publicized than Kennedy’s infidelities, Johnson, too, was a serial philanderer. During his time as vice president, the press openly called his Senate office “the nooky room.”
Johnson barely tried to hide his ongoing affairs, including one with a Hispanic secretary known
as the “chili queen” and another with a woman at his ranch known as the “dairy queen.” For an
intensely competitive man, womanizing was yet another way he could best his political rivals,
including Kennedy. “Why, I had more women by accident than he ever had by design,” Johnson
would boast (Dallek 1998, 186-187, 408).

Moreover, Johnson’s treatment of others could be crude and abusive. Johnson delighted
in forcing staffers to accompany him to the bathroom, giving them instructions as he handled his
business on the toilet. It was thought that he did this to remind his aides, lest they forget, who
was boss (Unger and Unger 1999, 371). Similarly, Johnson was an exhibitionist who would
roam around naked and demand that others join him for nude swims in the White House pool.
He enjoyed humiliating associates who were less well-endowed than he was. For Johnson, the
perfect aide was “someone who will kiss my ass in Macy’s window and stand up and say, ‘Boy
wasn’t that sweet’” (Peters 2010, 138-139). Few were spared this kind of humiliating treatment.
On one occasion, Johnson made Hubert Humphrey, the vice president of America, wear a
cowboy outfit far too large for him and ride a large horse around his ranch as a form of
amusement (Dallek 1998, 186). The truth is that Johnson would berate almost anyone in front of
a crowd, certainly including his wife, and he was equally prone to paranoid outbursts of rage.

If Johnson was not a saint in practice, he was at least consistently a saint in speech. The
President regularly carried certain lines from the Acts, Second Peter, and the Psalms around with
him (Woods 2006, 685, 688). Those who followed Johnson closely knew that in public he
commonly cited the words of Isaiah 1: 18, “Come now, let us reason together” (see, for example,
Johnson 1964d; Johnson 1965a; Johnson 1967). Further, Johnson’s speeches displayed an idiosyncratic fixation with prophets and prophesy; a simple search of the UCSB public papers database returns 92 different speeches where the President used one or both of these words.

Indeed, at one time or another it seems that Johnson used religious rhetoric in support of almost all of his policies. So, for instance, Johnson once defended his foreign aid packages by claiming that they were part of the country’s “Christian duty”: “We do this for two reasons: first, for the first time in history, man has the real power to overcome poverty. We have proved that by the wise application of modern technology. The determined labor of skilled men and women can ultimately produce enough food and clothing and shelter for all mankind. The possession of new abilities gives us new responsibilities and we want to live up to those responsibilities. That is our Christian duty” (Johnson 1964h). Medicare, as well, was framed as part of God’s expectations: “We are going to fight for medical care for the aged as long as we have breath in our bodies, until it is passed. We are going to put the energy of the Nation at the service of the most noble of God’s duties- the care of the sick and the helpless” (Johnson 1964o). The Highway Beautification Act of 1965 was praised because it would preserve “what God has gladly given” and all of “God’s finery.” Johnson promised, “And so long as I am President, what has been divinely given to nature will not be taken recklessly away by man” (Johnson 1965b). Johnson supplemented his case for the war on poverty with reference to Matthew 25, another of his favorite sections of Scripture: “But I have come to say that fighting together, we can and we will win this war on poverty in all this Nation. So help us fight this war and help us win this victory, and let us not wait for the day when the prophet will say that the harvest is past and the summer
is ended, and we are not yet saved. Let us, instead, work together so that one day we may hear
the benediction, ‘Well done, thou good and faithful servant’” (Johnson 1964m). In one speech,
Johnson would go as far as claiming that the impetus behind his entire Great Society agenda was
a desire to translate Christian ethics into public policy. As Johnson told an assembly of
Methodists in 1966, “Bishop Lord, it would be very hard for me to write a more perfect
description of the American ideal- or of the American commitments in the 1960’s. What you
have said in the Social Creed of the Methodist Church is what I along with Senator Brewster and
Senator Tydings and others in both Houses of Congress are trying to write into the laws of our
country today- and in the hearts of all of our people” (Johnson 1966).

Despite his obvious proclivity for religious language, and despite the religious milieu in
which he served, Johnson would only turn to a religious rhetorical strategy one time- as a means
for securing the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This was a continuation of the style of
argument that Kennedy had earlier adopted. And it was at this time that Johnson was faced with
a crisis of unmatched proportion. A president was dead. The country was a tinderbox. Not
insignificantly, Johnson’s own political future was on the line. A religious rhetorical strategy
once more was a tool of the desperate.

President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963 while riding in a
motorcade in downtown Dallas, TX. Johnson had become president in the worst of all
circumstances. To begin with, the country was shattered by Kennedy’s death. Most major
events, whether social or athletic, were immediately cancelled. Churches around the country

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13 The reader will shortly encounter examples of how Johnson would use exactly these same verses in support of
civil rights as well.
held extra services that overflowed with mourners. Others remained in their homes, glued to TV news broadcasts, weeping in private.

Johnson was not immune to these feelings, himself. He was, in many ways, a total mess. Johnson told Doris Kearns (1976, 172) that “Everything was in chaos. We were all spinning around and around, trying to come to grips with what had happened, but the more we tried to understand it, the more confused we got.” Johnson was concerned that the “enormity of the tragedy” could “overwhelm” him and yet he knew he could not “become immobilized… with emotion.” He called himself a “man in trouble.” On November 23, Johnson was so tormented that he insisted that Horace Busby, an old friend and current aide, spend the night in his bedroom with he and Lady Bird. Busby sat watching the President try to sleep from an armchair to the side. Twice during the night he tried to slip away before Johnson called out for him to stay (Dallek 1998, 55).

These fears were more than just general anxieties about his new responsibilities; they also reflected specific political concerns. Johnson was stepping into a complex situation. The new President immediately recognized that he had to act quickly on civil rights. For one, many saw the assassination as a consequence of the pernicious racial hate coursing through the country. Chief Justice Earl Warren added fuel to this fire when he issued a statement saying that Kennedy had died “as a result of the hatred and bitterness that has been injected into the life of our nation by bigots” (Los Angeles Times 1963a). In reality, there was plenty of fuel for that fire to go around, though. Upon hearing of the shooting, Rep. Hale Boggs (D-LA) screamed at Rep. William Colmer (D-MS), an outspoken segregationist, “Your people killed that man!” Certain
racist elements did little to dispel this impression. Some did disgustingly cheer the news of Kennedy’s death. At Mississippi State College, for example, cowbells rang in celebration. Some portion of Americans sadly agreed with a young man in Alabama who told a radio call-in show that “Kennedy got exactly what he deserved- that any white man who did what he did… should be shot” (Kotz 2005, 6-7). The existence of these kinds of views made action on civil rights practically a matter of national security.

Moreover, civil rights were crucial to Johnson’s own political future as well. Johnson’s previous record on the issue was not flattering. He had been a consistent opponent of civil rights until 1957, at which point he used his position as Senate majority leader to help guide through the mostly underwhelming Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960. Prior to then, Johnson had regularly bragged to constituents about his opposition to civil rights. In fact, Johnson’s first speech on the floor as a Senator in March of 1949 was a denunciation of Harry Truman’s civil rights proposals. Johnson argued that they would “deprive one minority (the South) of its rights in order to extend rights to other minorities” and that they “would necessitate a system of Federal police officers such as we have never before seen” (Stern 1991, 689). By all accounts Johnson felt no personal animus towards African Americans, but instead was responding to the reality of being a Senator from racially segregated Texas. Johnson would explain to civil rights advocates that the only thing a supportive vote from him would accomplish was his defeat in the following election. Now, circumstances had changed. When one Senator asked Lady Bird to explain Johnson’s unexpected turnabout she simply answered “The President has to take into consideration many things that a senator does not” (Bernstein 1996, 46).
Still, Johnson’s background meant that he was naturally looked upon with skepticism from many quarters when he ascended to the top job. John Kenneth Galbraith immediately warned the new president that “the whole liberal community” would be watching what he did on civil rights (Bornet 1983, 18-19). Shortly after Kennedy’s death, a small but powerful group of liberal insiders began meeting privately to discuss whether it would be possible to deny Johnson the nomination in 1964. These individuals, like many others, viewed Bobby Kennedy as JFK’s rightful heir (Isserman and Kazin 2004, 107-108). Johnson had to be aware of these rumblings and he certainly knew what they meant for civil rights. Johnson’s old patron Sen. Richard Russell (D-GA) understood Johnson’s dilemma perfectly: “If Johnson compromises he will be called a slicker from Texas” (Dallek 1998, 114). Johnson, too, understood this calculus perfectly well himself: “I knew that if I didn’t get out in front on this issue, they (the liberals) would get me. They’d throw up my background against me, they’d use it to prove that I was incapable of bringing unity to the land I loved so much… I couldn’t let that happen. I had to produce a civil rights bill that was even stronger than the one they’d have gotten if Kennedy had lived. Without this, I’d be dead before I could even begin” (Kearns 1976, 191).

Barely anyone knew anything about Johnson. A poll taken in the first days of his Administration showed that only 5% of people felt they knew much about him as opposed to the 67% who reported knowing next to nothing about him (Dallek 1998, 54). How Johnson elected to handle the civil rights question would go a long way to define his presidency.

It is clear that Johnson was under a tremendous amount of pressure. The country was grieving a slain president, he was uncertain of his own ability to do the job and civil rights
loomed as a crucial problem for both the country and his own political future. And so in this uncertain time, Johnson turned to religious rhetoric as a means for selling the country on the need for legislation.

His rhetorical choice was consciously made and planned. In reality, Johnson had already recommended the use of religious rhetoric to Kennedy. Johnson told Ted Sorenson, a top Kennedy aide, in June of 1963 that the President should travel to a southern city, look its residents “in the eye” and explain “the moral issue and the Christian issue” (Lawson 1981, 98). Walt Rostow, a Kennedy security advisor, was aware of these conversations: “The point he (Johnson) was trying to make- and did drive home- was, if you want to carry the South on this thing and break the filibuster, there is only one appeal you can make: it is the right thing to do. You must appeal to morality, to their attachment to the Bible” (Strober and Strober 2003, 288).

As usual, Johnson had his finger on the pulse of his constituents, “What Negroes are really seeking is moral force,” the VP once said (Rorabaugh 2002, 116). Now, as president himself, Johnson had the opportunity to take his own advice. Johnson later remembered, “Now I knew that as President I couldn’t make people want to integrate their schools or open their doors to blacks but I could make them feel guilty for not doing it and I believed it was my moral responsibility to do precisely that- to use the moral persuasion of my office to make people feel that segregation was a curse they’d carry with them to their graves” (Woods 2006, 475).

Johnson began his religious campaign for civil rights with his first national address, given to a joint session of Congress on the night of November 27, 1963 (Johnson 1963a). The very occasion of the speech was tinged with religious symbolism because it shared certain aspects in
common with funeral ceremonies. Recall that this address was taking place just four days after the assassination. The country had not yet finished mourning. As such, the public would obviously expect Johnson to praise Kennedy’s life and accomplishments and, indeed, Johnson did open with a eulogy of sorts for the fallen president: “The greatest leader of our time has been struck down by the foulest deed of our time. Today John Fitzgerald Kennedy lives on in the immortal words and works that he left behind. He lives on in the mind and memories of mankind. He lives on in the hearts of his countrymen.” Johnson proceeded to laud Kennedy’s dreams, “the dream of conquering the vastness of space,” “the dream of a Peace Corps in less developed nations,” etc.

But this was also to be a policy address, a chance for Johnson to chart the course that he now intended to lead the nation on. As he began to do so, the new President emphasized that kind words for his predecessor would not be enough of a tribute. Civil rights legislation, however, would be. “First, no memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy’s memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long,” Johnson said. “We have talked long enough in this country about equal rights. We have talked for one hundred years or more. It is time now to write the next chapter, and to write it in the books of law. I urge you again, as I did in 1957 and again in 1960, to enact a civil rights law so that we can move forward to eliminate from this Nation every trace of discrimination and oppression that is based upon race or color. There could be no greater source of strength to this Nation both at home and abroad.” Johnson made a direct appeal for Kennedy’s tax bill, as well.
It would not be until the inspiring conclusion to the address that Johnson would closely link civil rights with religion via his rhetorical choices:

We meet in grief, but let us also meet in renewed dedication and renewed vigor. Let us meet in action, in tolerance, and in mutual understanding. John Kennedy’s death commands what his life conveyed- that America must move forward. The time has come for Americans of all races and creeds and political beliefs to understand and to respect one another. So let us put an end to the teaching and the preaching of hate and evil and violence. Let us turn away from the fanatics of the far left and the far right, from the apostles of bitterness and bigotry, from those defiant of law, and those who pour venom into our Nation’s bloodstream.

I profoundly hope that the tragedy and the torment of these terrible days will bind us together in new fellowship, making us one people in our hour of sorrow. So let us here highly resolve that John Fitzgerald Kennedy did not live- or die- in vain. And on this Thanksgiving eve, as we gather together to ask the Lord’s blessing, and give Him our thanks, let us unite in those familiar and cherished words:

America, America,  
God shed His grace on thee,  
And crown thy good  
With brotherhood  
From sea to shining sea.

A lot of interesting things are happening in these lines. For one, Johnson makes a second call for progress on civil rights (“The time has come for Americans of all races and creeds and political beliefs to understand to respect one another”) but this time he does so with the aid of a host of words with religious significance, words such as “preaching,” “evil,” “apostles,” and “fellowship.”

The sentence on “fellowship” (“I profoundly hope that the tragedy and the torment of these terrible days will bind us together in new fellowship, making us one people in our hour of sorrow”) merits some additional comment. In the New Testament, fellowship is a description of
the communal bond between Christians who have chosen to accept Christ as their savior. For instance, in the first letter of John (1: 6-7) it is written, “If we say we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” The existence of this fellowship indicates that believers share common experiences and a common hope for eternal life. In some sense, fellowship is the Christian equivalent of the Jewish “covenant” that bound the Israelites together both with each other and with God (Powell 2011, 285). Becoming “one people,” as Johnson wants, requires action on civil rights. It is only if such action is forthcoming that the country could be bound “together in a new fellowship.”

From a broader perspective, though, Johnson was positioning Kennedy as a martyr for civil rights. The final paragraphs are about hatred and in them Johnson asks that the country resolve that Kennedy “did not live- or die- in vain.” The suggestion- which, as I explained above, was already a powerful thought in the country- is that Kennedy’s death was in some way connected to the battle over civil rights. Making Kennedy a martyr for the cause would be a very potent image for Johnson to have at his disposal.

Martyrs have a long history in Christian tradition. By definition, a martyr is typically understood to be someone who died for their religious beliefs. Historically, Saints Paul, Peter and many other influential early Christians died as victims of Roman persecution. Although the veneration of martyrs is something that mostly occurred in later years, the Bible does contain several examples of martyrs as well. Jesus himself would be the most notable example, but also
there are the cases of Stephen (Acts 22: 20) and James (Acts 12: 1-2) in addition to several other references to martyrdom found in the Book of Revelation.

The truth is that this address would not be the only time that Johnson would create the impression that Kennedy had been martyred for civil rights. In fact, he would do so with some regularity, often by paralleling Kennedy’s death to Lincoln, a president who most certainly did die for the cause of racial justice.¹⁴

At a memorial service held for Kennedy at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington one month after his death (Johnson 1963e), Johnson opened his remarks by saying “Thirty days and a few hours ago, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, 35th President of the United States, died a martyr’s death. The world will not forget what he did here. He will live on in our hearts, which will be his shrine. Throughout his life, he had malice toward none; he had charity for all. But a senseless act of mindless malice struck down this man of charity, and we shall never be the same.” The “malice toward none” and “charity for all” lines, not coincidentally, are adapted from Lincoln’s second inaugural address, a speech that ruminated on the meaning of the Civil War and what would be needed if the combatants were to reconcile (see chapter one). The fact that the subject of Lincoln’s speech was a racially motivated conflict is not insignificant. By following a

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¹⁴ Interestingly, Johnson also appeared to view himself as somewhat of a martyr. In his interviews with Doris Kearns, Johnson frequently lamented the fact that he had to sacrifice his presidency for Vietnam- and that he received no credit for doing so. “I knew from the start that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really loved- the Great Society- in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. All my programs. All my hopes to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. All my dreams to provide education and medical care to the browns and the blacks and the lame and the poor. But if I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as a coward and my nation would be seen as an appeaser and we would find it impossible to accomplish anything for anybody anywhere on the entire globe” (Kearns 1976, 251-252). Genuinely believing these things, Johnson confessed in the dark days of the war, “It’s hard to sleep these days. I’m beginning to feel like a martyr; misunderstood, misjudged by friends at home and abroad” (Dallek 1998, 259).
reference to martyrdom with a reference to racial violence, Johnson implies that racial violence was the *cause* of Kennedy’s martyrdom.

It is fitting, then, that Johnson concluded his remarks with a subdued plea for the civil rights package: “So let us here on this Christmas night determine that John Kennedy did not live or die in vain, that this Nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that we may achieve in our time and for all time the ancient vision of peace on earth, good will toward all men.” This is the same rhetorical structure as the address on November 22. Kennedy will have died in vain if we do not have “a new birth of freedom,” a birth that could be accomplished by passing the civil rights law.

Similarly, in remarks to a cabinet meeting on May 28, 1964 (Johnson 1964p), one day before what would have been JFK’s birthday, Johnson reminded his audience that “We would be untrue to the trust he (Kennedy) reposed in us, if we did not remain true to the tasks he relinquished when God summoned him.” If it was not clear that Johnson had civil rights particularly in mind, it would be soon. As the President continued:

John F. Kennedy called on many of the world’s masters for his messages to us. But his favorite quotation was from a man who preceded him in martyrdom: Abraham Lincoln.

“I know there is a God and that He hates injustice. I see the storm coming, and I know His hand is in it. But if He has a place and a part for me, I believe that I am ready.”

The death of John F. Kennedy again humbled us in the truth that His purpose must remain closed to men.

But your presence here this morning- your service over the past 6 months- is a rededication to a great President’s resolution- John F. Kennedy’s resolution.
We have fulfilled that pledge, determined that as long as He has a place and a part for us, we will be ready.

Here, Johnson explicitly calls Kennedy a martyr and again he links him to Lincoln. The points about God hating injustice and God having a plan are furthermore extremely poignant, ringing just as true in the 1960s as they did in the 1860s. It is easy to imagine how such language could lead to support for civil rights. Johnson did not have to mention the bill for his audience to know what he was talking about.

In another version of these sentiments, at a fundraising gala that very same evening Johnson made this style of argument again (Johnson 1964q). On this occasion, the President said:

Tonight the Nation needs the inspiration and the leadership of New Yorkers more than it has ever needed them. And I have come here to thank you and to ask you for your help in achieving those ends which lie beyond party - the ends of justice at home and peace in the world. I ask for the support of all citizens to complete the work so nobly begun by our martyred President, John F. Kennedy.

After the majority had spoken in Los Angeles, John Kennedy asked me to stand at his side in the fight to get America moving again. I left the convention hall dedicated to carrying out the programs, the policies, and the principles of John Kennedy because I believed they were good for America. That work has already begun. It must and it will continue. With the help of God and the good people of all of this country it will succeed.

So I ask you tonight to join me and march along the road to the future, the road that leads to the Great Society, where no child will go unfed and no youngster will go unschooled; where every child has a good teacher and every teacher has good pay, and both have good classrooms; where every human being has dignity and every worker has a job; where education is blind to color and employment is unaware of race; where decency prevails and courage abounds.
Johnson obviously is pressing a wider agenda in these lines. But civil rights is still mentioned as a crucial part of the martyred Kennedy’s work that must be completed.

Johnson once more drew the linkage between Kennedy and Lincoln in a brief speech that he delivered at an unveiling of a bust for Kennedy in November 1964 (Johnson 1964t). At the ceremony, Johnson noted, “For all of us, the tragic anniversary of this weekend makes this a very sad and sober time. We can here reflect upon the irony that President Kennedy himself had placed in this room a bust of another martyred President, Abraham Lincoln. As was said of the Great Emancipator, we can say of our friend and our brother and our great leader: He belongs to the ages.”

In sum, Johnson was unafraid to depict Kennedy as a martyr, a classification that has strong religious resonance. In doing so, he would not hesitate to compare Kennedy to Lincoln, a president assassinated because of his efforts to advance the cause of racial justice. Both of these decisions helped to motivate the conclusion that Kennedy had been martyred for his support of civil rights. On each occasion the audience was reminded that they must finish Kennedy’s work.

It is rare for any treatment of the era to acknowledge it, but Johnson actually gave another national address on November 28, the day after his appearance before Congress (Johnson 1963b). It was Thanksgiving Day. Some of the religious content of this speech certainly fell into the standard ceremonial type language we would expect to find. Yet Johnson also made another eloquent statement about the need for racial progress. In the middle of the speech, Johnson remarked:

In each administration the greatest burden that the President had to bear had been the burden of his own countrymen’s unthinking and unreasoning hate
and division.

So, in these days, the fate of this office is the fate of us all. I would ask all Americans on this day of prayer and reverence to think on these things.

Let all who speak and all who teach and all who preach and all who publish and all who broadcast and all who read or listen—let them reflect upon their responsibilities to bind our wounds, to heal our sores, to make our society well and whole for the tasks ahead of us.

It is this work that I most want us to do: to banish rancor from our words and malice from our hearts; to close down the poison spring of hatred and intolerance and fanaticism; to perfect our unity north and south, east and west; to hasten the day when bias of race, religion, and region is no more; and to bring the day when our great energies and decencies and spirit will be free of the burdens that we have borne too long.

Towards the end of the speech, the President yet again re-emphasized the same point:

On this Thanksgiving Day, as we gather in the warmth of our families, in the mutual love and respect which we have for one another, and as we bow our heads in submission to divine providence, let us also thank God for the years that He gave us inspiration through His servant, John F. Kennedy.

Let us today renew our dedication to the ideals that are American. Let us pray for His divine wisdom in banishing from our land any injustice or intolerance or oppression to any of our fellow Americans whatever their opinion, whatever the color of their skins— for God made all of us, not some of us, in His image. All of us, not just some of us, are His children.

Johnson had thus made a strong religious argument about the need for equality (“God made all of us, not some of us, in His image”) and he had announced it as the “work that I most want us to do.” He had done these things on a day, as he called it, “of prayer and reverence.” He asked that the country “pray for His divine wisdom” about how best to eradicate prejudice. The last paragraph of this speech might as well have come from a minister.

When combined with his speech from a day earlier, Johnson’s religious rhetorical
campaign for civil rights was now well underway. In addition to the theme of martyrdom, Johnson’s language would feature several recurring religious arguments for civil rights that bear individual discussions.

One such motif would be the importance of the Golden Rule: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” (Mt 7: 12). Johnson would repeatedly call for civil rights by reference to this important dictate. He would tell his audience to place themselves in the shoes of a black American and then consider how they would want to be treated if they were in his or her position. Johnson’s speech to a group of Pittsburgh steelworkers in April 1964, for example, serves as an example of this method of persuasion (Johnson 1964j).

Towards the latter half of his speech, Johnson transitioned from a discussion of economic policy and into a discussion of civil rights policy. Johnson first updated his listeners on the progress of his bill. “We put a petition on the Speaker’s desk and started petitioning out with the help of the United Steelworkers and others the civil rights bill that was before the Rules Committee, and we got 180-odd signatures,” Johnson said. “They agreed to report the bill because we were in sight of the promised land.” These short lines contain a notable Biblical reference.

“Promised land” is a very well recognized piece of Biblical imagery. When God calls Abraham early in the book of Genesis, he does so with a promise that “To your offspring I will give this land” (Gen 12: 7), meaning Canaan. That promise is at various points renewed to Abraham’s descendants Isaac (Gen 26: 3) and Jacob (Gen 35: 12), among others. The idea of a
promised land is also very important in the history of Moses. At the burning bush, God tells Moses, “I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt, to… a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex 3: 17). The Israelites undertake a forty year journey in search of this land.

The Promised Land is depicted as fertile and abundant, a beautiful land of “milk and honey.” By claiming that passage of a civil rights law would be the equivalent of the Promised Land, Johnson is using a religious metaphor with very positive connotations.

So, having already begun to place civil rights in a religious context, Johnson forged ahead with his main religious argument based on the Golden Rule:

The best way for you to know what is happening in your country is just to imagine yourself in their position, and that your grandfather and your father and you had waited for 100 years for an equal shake and a fair shake that had never come.

Just put yourself in the position of the man who gets up in the morning and walks the street all day looking for a job that can’t be found, and he goes home and talks to his wife that night.

You put yourself in that position and apply the Golden Rule and do unto others as you would have them do unto you and we will clear up a lot of these problems that are requiring a long debate in the Congress. No President can be any stronger than the people behind him…

There will be times when you will be frustrated and when you may even be irritated. But the best way in the world to get sobered up from that hangover is just put yourself in that other fellow’s position and say, “How would I feel if I had been denied the job because of my religion or my race, or my color? How would I feel if I had been denied the right to buy a cup of coffee because of the color of my skin?” You ask yourself that question, and you will find the answer in your own heart.

We are going to pass a civil rights bill if it takes us all summer long, and we are going to pass it with the votes of both parties. We don’t want any Democratic labels on it. We want it to be an American bill, passed by Americans. We are going to keep this country at peace, if God wills it, and
we are doing our best. We are going to ask men of both parties to help us do that.

As the bill inched closer to passage, Johnson would not retreat from such phrasings. In fact, he would offer roughly the same rationale for civil rights at a fundraising dinner in Minneapolis that June (Johnson 1964r). Equality was demanded, the President argued, by a law “more hallowed than even the Constitution of the United States.”

Under the leadership of Hubert Humphrey and with an assist every now and then from some of the rest of us, we are about to pass the strongest and the best civil rights bill in this century. We are going on from this bill to give every American citizen, of every race and color, the equal rights which the Constitution demands and justice directs.

This will not be a simple task. The events of the past few days again illuminate how painful can be the path to racial justice. No law can instantly destroy the differences that are shaped over centuries. But that is not the question. For once a law is passed, no man can defy it, and no leader can refuse to enforce it. For if our laws are flouted, our society will fail.

And I would remind you good Americans tonight that there is a law more hallowed than the civil rights bill, more hallowed than even the Constitution of the United States. That law commands every man to respect the life and dignity of his neighbor; to treat others as he would be treated. That law asks not only obedience in our action, but it requires understanding in our heart. And may God grant us that understanding.

As it happens, Johnson most commonly relied on the Golden Rule in remarks he made before business leaders. In so doing, the President was trying to persuade his audiences both to support his policies and to themselves create additional opportunities for African Americans.

One of the Johnson Administration civil rights initiatives was known as Plans for Progress. These were voluntary agreements large employers made whereby they promised to diversify their workforces. Johnson would make mention of the Golden Rule almost every time he spoke
to one of these gatherings. On December 12, 1963, for instance, Johnson said, “We live in a world where America is outnumbered 17 to 1. And if we were to divide that world by color or by race or by ancestry, we would be greatly outnumbered. And I think, perhaps, the best way to quickly illustrate what is really in our hearts is to remind ourselves of the Golden Rule, ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’” Johnson continued, “So when you’re dealing with these people, in your company, or in your firm, or in your business, just remember they’re some daughter’s father, or some boy’s mother, or someone’s sister, or somebody’s brother that you are dealing with. And except for the grace of God, it might be you- that they were dealing with you instead of you dealing with them” (Johnson 1963d).

On January 16, 1964 Johnson expressed similar feelings, only this time he did so much more extensively and much more forcefully (Johnson 1964b). The President exhorted the businessmen in attendance to lead the way on civil rights, to set an example that the rest of the country could follow: “If you men in this group can join the others that have already paved the way and cover six million employees and add to that total the group that you represent, we won’t have to fight this battle in the streets. We will have fought it in our minds and we will have reached a logical and proper conclusion. And we will say that there is some truth in the statement that all men are created equal and there is some point in following the Golden Rule of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you.” But from here, Johnson became more introspective and commented much more broadly on the civil rights question beyond the immediate issue of the Plans for Progress program. Johnson went on, “I don’t know how long it has been since you engaged in a little introspection. I don’t know why you have to wait until
next Thanksgiving or Christmas comes or some tragedy befalls you in your own family for you to realize how fortunate and blessed you are. I don’t know why you can’t say, ‘Except for the grace of God, I might be in his place and he might be in mine.’ And think about how you would like to be treated if you lived in a land where you could not go to school with your fellow Americans, where you could not work along the side of them, where you could travel from Texas to Washington, across many States and not be able to go to a bathroom without hiding in a thicket or dodging behind a culvert.” With these considerations in mind, Johnson called for the men and women in the crowd to advance the cause of justice, at the very least for the security of their own soul: “So let’s not rely upon our great economic power and the great wealth we possess to do justice. Let’s do it ourselves, so when we go to bed we will have a clear conscience. And when we do that we will rightfully be entitled to lead the world. We’ll lead them because of our moral standards and not because of our economic power.” Pointedly, Johnson told the gathering, “it is up to you to pick up where Lincoln left off. It is up to you to achieve in the days ahead what we have been waiting for a hundred years.” Hence, the religious content of these remarks (mentions of God’s grace and the role of conscience) goes well beyond the President’s standard repetitions of the Golden Rule.

Johnson’s remarks to the Plans for Progress participants were equally broad on April 9 (Johnson 1964f). On this day, the President expressed optimism about the passage of his civil

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15 This last point was a reference to a story that had left a deep impression on Johnson. Johnson had earlier learned that Zephyr Wright, his cook while he was Vice President, had been unable to use the restrooms at gas stations across the South, even while driving the Vice President’s official car. The treatment upset Johnson greatly and he would re-tell the anecdote often. As he told Mississippi Senator John Stennis, “That’s wrong. And there ought to be something to change that.” (Dallek 1998, 113).
rights law, a law which “justice and decency make… necessary.” However, the adoption of the law would not be enough, Johnson claimed, because “any law is insufficient unless it is supported- and all of us have had some experience in this field- by the moral commitment of the people of the country.” So, Johnson proceeded to urge the businessmen present to make that moral commitment themselves, in part by once more citing the Golden Rule: “Bear in mind that golden rule- ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,’ and examine your personnel department; examine your own conscience. See if you are doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. If you are, then we can say, ‘Well done, thou faithful servant.’ But until you can say that, until you can do that, until there is increased understanding, until there is a desire to put this bill into effect and make it work, we still have our job to do.”

The second Biblical quote Johnson uses here was another of his favorites. “Well done, thou faithful servant” is a line taken from Jesus’ parable of the talents (Mt 25: 14-30), a passage I have already discussed earlier in the Carter case (see chapter five). The parable’s point is that believers are required to be true in performing the work they have been asked to do. Although the parable is a piece of New Testament wisdom, it includes the harsh consequences of failure found more commonly in the Old Testament; for his poor management, one servant is thrown out into the dark upon the master’s return where “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt 25: 30). This is a clear symbol of damnation. And it is in this context that Johnson would more often use the quote as he warned people of what might happen were they not to support civil rights. Indeed, warnings of punishment or eternal judgment were a third prominent aspect of LBJ’s religious rhetoric on civil rights.
A soft version of this kind of argument, one using that same line from the Gospels, can be found in Johnson’s remarks at the 20th conference of the Advertising Council in Washington on May 6, 1964 (Johnson 1964l). Johnson devoted almost half of his speech to civil rights. He first described the objectives of the bill, objectives which he argued “surely enlightened businessmen believe.” These objectives, Johnson said, were “moral objectives” and civil rights a “moral problem.” What Johnson wanted was for the Council to help spread his message for they “are the great molders of public opinion” and “the persuaders.” Johnson’s appeal to them was entirely religious:

Let us not wait for the day when the prophet will say that the harvest is past and the summer is ended, and we are not saved. Let us, instead, work together so that one day we may hear the benediction, “Well done, thou good and faithful servants.”

So I ask you this morning to resolve here, now, as individuals, not as a conference, to give us that help that is necessary, to passing this program that will give us a greater and a better society. Determine here that you will engrave your name on that honor roll of leaders of this Nation who in the 20th century sought to give finality to a proclamation that Lincoln issued a hundred years ago.

It is true that a hundred years ago this year a great American President freed the slaves of their chains, but he did not free America of its bigotry, and he did not free us from the prejudice of color. Until education is blind to color, until employment is unaware of race, emancipation will be a proclamation but it will not be a fact.

As the rest of the world looks upon this rich and strong Nation, let us not only pray and work for peace and good will toward all men, but let us determine that the sore spots here in our own social life can be wiped and washed away and we can set an example for the rest of the world.

The first line of this passage (“the harvest is past and the summer is ended, and we are not saved”) is actually a Biblical quote found in the Book of Jeremiah (8: 20). This section of
Jeremiah, like the book itself, is rather confusing. The surrounding paragraphs are a long form poem that intersperses God’s words with comments from both the people and the prophet himself. The main point of this poem, however, is the idea that the people have gone astray and as a result will be punished (Pixley 2004, 31-33). The specific line Johnson chose to use is, indeed, the lament of those facing God’s wrath as a consequence of their actions. When combined with the reference to the parable of the talents, which, again, ends with a man consigned to torment for his failures, this part of Johnson’s speech reads as a stark warning that God will be displeased with America should it fail to act on civil rights. It really is not necessary to be aware of the context to grasp this message. Anyone can understand what Johnson is hinting at when he says “Let us not wait for the day when… we are not saved.”

In fact, Johnson was even more overt with his Old Testament style admonitions in a speech he delivered to the members of the American Society of Newspaper Editors two weeks earlier (Johnson 1964g). Johnson hinted early in the speech that these remarks would be special by means of a humorous old anecdote:

We had a preacher back home who dropped his notes just as he was leaving his church one time, and his dog jumped at them and tore them up. When the preacher went into the pulpit, he apologized to his congregation and said, “I am very sorry, today I have no sermon. I will just have to speak as the Lord directs. But I will try to do better next Sunday.”

I don’t have a speech today. I just intend to do as George Reedy directed at the press conference this morning- to speak as the Lord directs. I thought I might talk to you about this job which fate has thrust upon me.

Having thus claimed to be speaking only “as the Lord directs,” Johnson proceeded to review his own role in the American political system at considerable length. He spoke of the
awesome responsibility a president has to lead the people not just for today but in preparation for
the future. Civil rights was the first policy Johnson mentioned as he said, “Our Nation will live
in tormented ease until the civil rights bill now being considered is written into the book of law.
The question is no longer, ‘Shall it be passed?’ The question is ‘When, when, when will it be
passed?’ We cannot deny to a group of our own people, our own American citizens, the
essential elements of human dignity which a majority of our citizens claim for ourselves.” Civil
rights, the President said, were an “obligation” and a “moral, national commitment.” Johnson
continued to speak about the War on Poverty, about Medicare, about a government pay bill even.
But then Johnson had some strong religious words for his listeners in closing:

> And from our science and our technology, from our compassion and from
our tolerance, from our unity and from our heritage, we stand uniquely on
the threshold of a high adventure of leadership by example and by precept.
“Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord.” From our
Jewish and Christian heritage, we draw the image of the God of all
mankind, who will judge his children not by their prayers and by their
pretensions, but by their mercy to the poor and their understanding of the
weak.

> We cannot cancel that strain and then claim to speak as a Christian society.
To visit the widow and the fatherless in their affliction is still pure religion
and undefiled. I tremble for this Nation. I tremble for our people if at the
time of our greatest prosperity we turn our back on the moral obligations of
our deepest faith. If the face we turn to this aspiring, laboring world is a
face of indifference and contempt, it will rightly rise up and strike us down.

> Believe me, God is not mocked. We reap as we sow. Our God is still a
jealous God, jealous of his righteousness, jealous of his mercy, jealous for
the last of the little ones who went unfed while the rich sat down to eat and
rose up to play. And unless my administration profits the present and
provides the foundation for a better life for all humanity, not just now but
for generations to come, I shall have failed.

> If there is judgment in history, it rests on us, according to our generosity or
our disdain. These are the stakes, to make a world in which all of God’s children can live or to go into the dark. For today as we meet here in this beautiful rose garden under the shadows of atomic power it is not rhetoric but it is truth to say that we must either love each other or we must die.

It is difficult to be sure about what specific policies Johnson had in mind in these paragraphs. On the one hand, he was certainly referencing his foreign aid goals. In the paragraph preceding the excerpt Johnson highlighted the plight of the “Two-thirds of the teeming masses of humanity” who were struggling “fitfully to assert its own initiative.” In the excerpt, as well, Johnson mentions the “poor,” the “weak,” and the “aspiring, laboring world.” However, the remarks read broader than that single objective alone. Indeed, Johnson returns in this section to the basic theme of his speech, that being the need to set the stage for the future of the country: “And unless my administration profits the present and provides the foundation for a better life for all humanity, not just now but for generations to come, I shall have failed.” Civil rights had already been positioned as a key part of that project. Furthermore, it is hard not read certain references “to make a world in which all of God’s children can live,” and “we must either love each other or we must die,” as references to civil rights. Others interpreted this speech as such. Hedrick Smith (1964) of the *New York Times*, for example, reported, “Preaching the need for action on his poverty program and medical care legislation as well as the civil rights bill, Mr. Johnson told the editors: ‘We must either love each other or we must die.’” Smith actually made the plea for civil rights the focus of his entire piece on the address.

Regardless, such a lengthy thought places a religious frame around all of the content in the speech, whether intentionally or not. Again, what is important to note is that Johnson was issuing a warning. He depicts a God who will judge America. “God is not mocked.” “We reap
as we sow.” Johnson “trembles” for the nation. The implication is that the passage of the civil rights bill was crucial if the country hoped to avoid a terrible fate.

What is especially remarkable about Johnson’s speech is that it was addressed to an entirely secular audience of newspaper editors, some of whom had to be surprised at the extent of the religious rhetoric they encountered. This is in contrast, of course, to Johnson’s talks with religious leaders, where spiritual rhetoric on civil rights was to be expected. On this point, Johnson certainly did not disappoint. In his remarks to members of the Southern Baptist Christian Leadership Seminar on March 25, 1964, Johnson demonstrated his ability to put the cause of civil rights in terms the faithful were familiar with (Johnson 1964e). A good deal of the speech was about the Johnson family’s history with Baptists. However, Johnson also made an extensive argument about the connection between spiritual beliefs and social policy:

I am not a theologian. I am not a philosopher. I am just a public servant that is doing the very best I know how. But in more than 3 decades of public life, I have seen first-hand how basic spiritual beliefs and deeds can shatter barriers of politics and bigotry. I have seen those barriers crumble in the presence of faith and hope, and from this experience I have drawn new hope that the seemingly insurmountable moral issues that we face at home and abroad today can be resolved by men of strong faith and men of brave deeds.

We can only do this if the separation of church and state, a principle to which Baptists have given personal witness for all their long history, only if the separation of church and state does not mean the divorce of spiritual values from secular affairs. Today we have common purposes. Great questions of war and peace, of civil rights and education, the elimination of poverty at home and abroad, are the concern of millions who see no difference in this regard between their beliefs and their social obligations. This principle, the identity of private morality and public conscience, is as deeply rooted in our tradition and Constitution as the principle of legal separation. Washington in his first inaugural said that the roots of national policy lay in private morality.
Lincoln proclaimed as a national faith that right makes might. Surely this is so, and surely if we are to complete the great unfinished work of our society, spiritual beliefs from which social actions spring must be the strongest weapons in our arsenal. The most critical challenge that we face today is the struggle to free men, free them from the bondage of discrimination and prejudice. This administration is doing everything it possibly can do to win that struggle…

In the long struggle for religious liberty, Baptists have been prophets. Your forebears have suffered as few others have suffered, and their suffering was not in vain. This cause, too, this cause of human dignity, this cause of human rights demands prophets in our time, men of compassion and truth, unafraid of the consequences of fulfilling their faith. There are preachers and there are teachers of injustice and dissension and distrust at work in America this very hour. They are attempting to thwart the realization of our highest ideals. There are those who seek to turn back the rising tide of human hope by sowing half-truths and untruths wherever they find root. There are voices crying peace, peace, peace, when there is no peace.

Help us to answer them with truth and with action. Help us to pass this civil rights bill and establish a foundation upon which we can build a house of freedom where all men can dwell. Help us, when this bill has been passed, to lead all of our people in this great land into a new fellowship.

Let the acts of everyone, in Government and out, let all that we do proclaim that righteousness does exalt the Nation.

Very clearly, Johnson is claiming that the religious beliefs of Baptists should compel them to support civil rights. There is an undeniable connection, the President says, between “private morality and public conscience.” At the same time, Johnson supplements this call for action with numerous religious references to concepts like “prophets” and another reference to “fellowship.” Finally, the last line (“Let the acts of everyone… proclaim that righteous does exalt the Nation”) is based on a line from Proverbs 14: 34: “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.”
Johnson voiced similar feelings to a group of civil rights leaders that April (Johnson 1964):

All that this bill will do is to see to it that service and employment will not be refused to individuals because of their race or their religion or where their ancestors were born. This bill is going to pass if it takes us all summer, and this bill is going to be signed and enacted into law because justice and morality demand it.

But laws and government are, at best, coarse instruments for remolding social institutions or illuminating the dark places of the human heart. They can deal only with the broadest and the most obvious problems, constantly guarding against segregation in schools but not against the thousands of incidents of discrimination and hatred which give the lie to what is learned there in the schoolroom.

They can call for the highest standards of moral conduct, but those standards are only tortuously imposed on a community which does not accept them, for laws do not create moral convictions. Those convictions must come from within the people themselves, and it is your job, as men of God, to reawaken the conscience of your beloved land, the United States of America.

It is your job as prophets in our time to direct the immense power of religion in shaping the conduct and the thoughts of men toward their brothers in a manner consistent with compassion and love. So help us in this hour. Help us to see and do what must be done. Inspire us with renewed faith. Stir our consciences. Strengthen our will. Inspire and challenge us to put our principles into action.

For the future of our faith is at stake, and the future of this Nation is at stake.

As the Old Testament pleads, “Let there be no strife, I pray, between you and me, and between my herdmen and your herdmen, because we are brothers.” So do we plead today.

Yes, we are all brothers, and brothers together must build this great Nation into a great family, so that a hundred years from now in this house every man and woman present today will have their name pointed to with pride because in the hour of our greatest trial, we were willing to answer the roll
and to stand up and be counted for morality and right.

The general message of this speech is the same as that found in the President’s remarks to the April 9 Plans for Progress ceremonies; a civil rights law alone will not be enough without a corresponding moral commitment being made by the people. So, Johnson forcefully asks the preachers to awaken the consciences of their congregations. Notably, he also uses a Biblical quote from Genesis (13: 8). The quote itself points to the importance of brotherhood, another religious concept with great significance (see chapter four). Without equality, this state of brotherhood could not exist.

A final theme that marked Johnson’s religious discourse on civil rights was his varied use of universal moral statements. This was a common habit of the President’s and one which we have already encountered much evidence of. Johnson would offer these moral claims whether the audience was religious, as in the last two speeches above, or not. In some places these statements would have explicit connections to religion, in others they would be merely vague articulations of standards of right and wrong.

At a meeting of the AFL-CIO: “Before the Congress also is a civil rights bill that is denied a hearing in the Rules Committee. The endless abrasions of delay, neglect, and indifference have rubbed raw the national conscience. We have talked too long. We have done too little. And all of it has come too late. You must help me make civil rights in America a reality.” (Johnson 1963c). In his 1964 State of the Union address: “Let me make one principle of this administration abundantly clear: All of these increased opportunities- in employment, in education, in housing, and in every field-must be open to Americans of every color. As far as
the writ of Federal law will run, we must abolish not some, but all racial discrimination. For this is not merely an economic issue, or a social, political, or international issue. It is a moral issue, and it must be met by the passage this session of the bill now pending in the House” (Johnson 1964a). As he was interviewed on TV and radio by the major broadcasters: “I think great progress has been made under the leadership of President Kennedy and the Attorney General and others in the last year is getting all the people of the Nation to accept their moral responsibility and take some leadership in this field where there has been so much discrimination. And I know of nothing more important for this Congress to do than to pass the Civil Rights Act as the House passed it. And I hope that can be done after due deliberation” (Johnson 1964c). At a press conference in April 1964 in response to a question on civil rights demonstrations: “I think the most important thing we can do to ease this situation is to act with promptness and dispatch on the very good civil rights bill that is now pending in the Senate… I have a deep faith that whatever may have been our sins of the past, we are going to try to do our best in our lifetime, and we are making progress. I don’t believe that we are going to be stopped either by fanaticism or rudeness…” (Johnson 1964i). And, finally, in a powerful address to legislature of Georgia: “My ancestors felt free to ask their fellow Georgians for the help of their neighbors when they needed it. In the same way, I come here this morning at the invitation of your Governor to pay tribute and honor to your great legislature, and I come also to ask for your help and to ask for your prayers in a task that is shared by the people, sustained by the labor, and strengthened by the freedom of all the people of these United States. In God’s praise and under God’s guidance, let all of us resolve this morning to help heal the last fading scars of old battles. Let us match
united wills to boundless means, so that many years from now men will say it was at that time, in that place of free men, that the possibilities of our past turned to the grandeur of our future” (Johnson 1964n).

In terms of sheer quantity of religious rhetoric, Johnson’s campaign for civil rights legislation is almost unmatched. From the time he took office in November 1963 until when he signed the Civil Rights Act on July 2, 1964, LBJ hammered home a religious rationale for civil rights. He did so by making Kennedy a martyr, by citing the Golden Rule, by warning of Old Testament style judgment and by virtue of generalized moral claims. All of these themes were the product of a conscious choice Johnson had made to, as he put it, make people “feel guilty.” And, like every case in this dissertation, Johnson only made the decision to turn to religious rhetoric in a time of crisis.

As we have seen, both Kennedy and Johnson made strong religious arguments for the bill over the course of the time period between June 1963 and July 1964. As such, it makes eminent sense to treat the efforts of each Administration as one continuous campaign. The question that we now turn to is how much might these rhetorical constructions have mattered? The answer is less than some might think.

The opinion data available for analysis is limited as this time frame was still very early in the evolution of modern survey methods. What is available, however, does not suggest that religious rhetoric was of much use to either man. Both Kennedy and Johnson delivered major addresses on civil rights, Kennedy on June 11, 1963 and Johnson on November 27 and 28, 1963. It is impossible to estimate what impact Johnson’s addresses may have had on his approval;
Gallup’s first poll was not taken until December 5. But for Kennedy his June 11 address did not help him, and may very well have hurt him. Kennedy’s approval rating before the address, measured on May 23, was 64%. In the first poll taken after the address, Kennedy clocked in at 61% on June 21 (Ragsdale 2009, 230). This margin of decline is not enough to be statistically significant and there is a good deal of time in between the ratings and the speech, too, which complicates any conclusions. Still, there is additional evidence that taking such a strong position on civil rights worked to Kennedy’s detriment, religious rhetoric regardless.

For instance, Kennedy’s own data showed an immediate and precipitous decline in his standing following his address. Although no one has ever located the specific source, Kennedy told civil rights leaders gathered at the White House on June 22 that he had just been given a new poll that showed approval of his administration had fallen from 60 to 47 percent (Dallek 2003, 642). Further, as Chart 9.1 illustrates, beginning in late May, Kennedy’s approval did gradually fall about ten points by September. It is certainly reasonable to suspect that civil rights had a lot to do with this deterioration. An October Newsweek poll reached exactly this conclusion. This poll estimated that about 4.5 million white voters had abandoned Kennedy as a consequence of civil rights, leading the researchers to report that “The civil-rights issue represents a definite, distinct loss for Mr. Kennedy in 1964, and, if it grows into the overriding issue, it might just cost him the election” (O’Brien 2009, 164-165). Most of these defectors, obviously, were from the South; Kennedy’s approval in these states had dropped from 60% in March to 44% in September (Giglio 1991, 202). Kennedy’s religious arguments for civil rights do not appear to have protected him from the political fallout from his proposals.
Issue specific data is even harder to come by. Few identical questions on civil rights were repeatedly asked and certainly no question was asked with a frequency that would allow us to gain meaningful traction on the change in opinion over this roughly one year period. It must be said that there is some hint that Kennedy and Johnson’s religious rhetoric may have benefitted their cause, though. On three occasions, in June 1963, August 1963 and January 1964, Gallup asked the following: “How would you feel about a law which would give all persons- Negro as well as white- the right to be served in public places such as hotels, restaurants, theaters, and similar establishments- would you like to see Congress pass such a law, or not?” Over the course of those three readings, those responding “yes” increased from 49% to 54% to 61% (Gallup Organization 1963a; 1963b; 1964). How much we can take from this finding is debatable. This set includes only three readings and the last is in January, well before the final Congressional brawl over the bill got underway.
Further, more comprehensive analysis on civil rights opinion must make us question the influence of any president’s rhetoric in this area. By borrowing from Victor Hugo, Everett Dirksen (R-IL), the Republican Senate leader, had it right in 1964: “Stronger than all the armies is an idea whose time has come.” The time had come for civil rights in 1964. The story of civil rights opinion is one of a consistent and gradual movement towards increasing tolerance.

According to Page and Shapiro’s (1992, 69) exhaustive data, support for school integration, for example, was 31% in 1942, 50% in 1956, 66% in 1963, 71% in 1965, 76% in 1970, 88% in 1980 and 93% in 1985. The sixty point change is the largest they found on record. Questions on related issues like public accommodations, employment and housing segregation reveal similar trends. Page and Shapiro observe that unlike some of the other issues they study, particularly foreign policy, when it comes to civil rights there is scant evidence of dramatic changes in opinion that can be associated with specific events. The trend towards integration is visible even well before the landmark Brown v Board of Education school desegregation ruling in 1954. Instead, the authors point to the overwhelming importance of broader historical developments. Around the turn of the century, new anthropological research, combined with the increasingly impressive achievements of America’s black citizens in the North, began to convince elites, and then the wider public, that the old theories about inferiority were wrong. Naturally, this eventually led to the conclusion that discrimination was wrong, also. What seems most likely, therefore, is that Kennedy and Johnson’s moralizing did not convince people that the “time had come” for civil rights; people were rather in the process of finally realizing that truth for themselves. As Page and Shapiro (80) conclude, “If this account is correct… then any opinion-
leading roles of the Supreme Court and President Johnson and other political figures were quite secondary, reacting to change, helping mainly to legitimate the evolving egalitarian beliefs and to spell out policy implications.”

As far as the media goes, the editorial reaction that greeted Kennedy’s June civil rights address was also rather muted. Over the course of the subsequent week, just thirteen editorials appeared in the four major papers under study (Table 9.1). Kennedy’s civil rights proposals were somewhat overshadowed by other important events that were taking place at the same time. Some writers chose to focus their columns on Kennedy’s important foreign policy address at American University. Others stuck to discussing George Wallace’s antics without mentioning Kennedy’s legislative response. Others preferred to ride their normal horses; on the 12th, the fiscally conservative Chicago Tribune (1963) printed a staff editorial on tax policy, and not on civil rights.

What little commentary appeared was slightly positive; the average score of these articles was 3.62. But, this score also indicates that the enthusiasm was tempered. For sure, different outlets heaped praise on Kennedy’s rhetoric. The New York Times (1963a) wrote that Kennedy “spoke both to and for the American conscience in his moving address.” By making his moral commitment clear, the paper claimed, it would become less likely that “there will be… battles in the street to establish the rights that are an American’s by birth.” In a follow up editorial, the Times argued that Kennedy’s speech “matched his magnificent Inaugural Address in idealism and fervor” and applauded the “luminousness of his challenge to the white conscience” (New York Times 1963b).
The *Times* board was strongly supportive of Kennedy. In a third piece they held that the country was faced with a national “crisis of conscience.” Although they admitted that the merits of Kennedy’s ideas would be a subject for “valid debate,” they also said “The overriding need for a stronger legal foundation will not. This is an issue that cannot be left for battles in the street; it is a matter of basic right, to be made secure by law” (*New York Times* 1963c). In yet a fourth article, the *Times* called for the Republicans to play ball with the President and stated that “the country has a right to expect the Republicans in Congress to proceed in the Lincoln tradition, and to join forces with the emancipated Democrats in enacting the minimal legislation offered by the President” (*New York Times* 1963d).

In truth, not a single author came out in express opposition to Kennedy’s call for new civil rights laws. What held the praise back was only a sober estimation of the challenges facing Kennedy’s program. For example, Joseph Alsop (1963) worried that the end result of the racial crisis would be a marked increase in the strength of the conservative coalition, to the detriment of many of Kennedy’s goals. Alsop wrote that recent evidence proved that conservatives “mean to play politics with this increasingly ugly national emergency.” James Reston (1963), on the other hand, thought that continued demonstrations might fracture the emerging consensus for civil rights.

From a broader perspective, however, I am unsure whether this positive average really suggests anything substantial about the persuasiveness of Kennedy’s religious rhetoric. Bear in mind, four of the thirteen articles were staff editorials written by *The New York Times*. All four received the highest possible positive score, a “5.” The *Times* is thus heavily responsible for the
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<td>6/12/63</td>
<td><em>New York Times</em></td>
<td>James Reston</td>
<td>“Kennedy and King Canute of Alabama”</td>
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<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“Troops at Tuscaloosa”</td>
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<td><em>Washington Post</em></td>
<td>Roscoe Drummond</td>
<td>“Will the Bill Pass?”</td>
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<td>6/13/63</td>
<td><em>New York Times</em></td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“Racial Assassination”</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/14/63</td>
<td><em>New York Times</em></td>
<td>James Reston</td>
<td>“A Time for Reflection and Vigilant Calm”</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/16/63</td>
<td><em>New York Times</em></td>
<td>James Reston</td>
<td>“No Longer a ‘Problem’ but a Revolution”</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/16/63</td>
<td><em>Los Angeles Times</em></td>
<td>Sen. Barry Goldwater</td>
<td>“Kennedy Should Settle the Race Issue…”</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/18/63</td>
<td><em>Los Angeles Times</em></td>
<td>Roscoe Drummond</td>
<td>“Hope of Avoiding Race Violence Rises…”</td>
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Dates: 6/12 – 6/18

Average Score 3.62

Positive Articles 6 (46.2%)

Negative Articles 2 (15.4%)

Mixed/Neutral Articles 5 (38.5%)
overall figure, and it is a paper known for its liberal editorial page— an editorial page that was thereby predisposed to agree with Kennedy to begin with. This was, almost literally given the nature of Kennedy’s message, an example of “preaching to the choir.”

There is even less to say about the media reaction to Johnson’s speeches on civil rights following Kennedy’s death. Only 9 editorials made reference to the new President’s remarks (Table 9.2). Here, at least, the editorial silence is easily explained; Kennedy had barely been laid to rest at the time. Indeed, some of the commentary that did appear seemed ready to write off the remainder of the year altogether. As the Los Angeles Times (1963b) wrote, “Most major legislation is dead for this session, as the President knows. While he forcefully appealed for passage of Mr. Kennedy’s top requests, Mr. Johnson set no timetable. In this he was being only realistic.” Similarly, Robert Donovan (1963) wrote, “There is no practical prospect that the Senate and the House will complete action on either taxes or civil rights at the current session. Mr. Johnson’s messages in January will give him a new opportunity to rally public and congressional support for these and other measures.” What little commentary there was slanted in favor of the President; Johnson averaged a 4.11 score— though, again, that number is based on just 9 articles. The only real negative feedback Johnson received during this week came from Walter Trohan (1963) who noted that, due to Kennedy’s death, “for a long time to come, President Johnson must walk on eggs.” Partly as a consequence, finding a solution on civil rights would be “difficult” and, Trohan claimed, “an all but impossible task.”

Still, the positive reaction to Johnson’s civil rights speeches was to be expected and likely had little to do with anything religious that he said. Johnson, as a new president taking office
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<td>11/29/63</td>
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<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“The President and the Congress”</td>
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<td>11/30/63</td>
<td><em>Chicago Tribune</em></td>
<td>Walter Trohan</td>
<td>“Pause for Mourning, Then Politics Goes On”</td>
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<td>12/1/63</td>
<td><em>New York Times</em></td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“Look Now to the Future”</td>
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<td>12/1/63</td>
<td><em>Washington Post</em></td>
<td>Robert Estabrook</td>
<td>“Civil Rights Aid View of Johnson”</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>12/1/63</td>
<td><em>Los Angeles Times</em></td>
<td>Robert Donovan</td>
<td>“Formidable Candidate Shaping Up”</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/3/63</td>
<td><em>New York Times</em></td>
<td>Staff Editorial</td>
<td>“Too Much Delay on Civil Rights”</td>
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Dates: 11/28 – 12/4

Average Score: 4.11

Positive Articles: 6 (66.7%)

Negative Articles: 1 (11.1%)

Mixed/Neutral Articles: 2 (22.2%)
under tragic circumstances, was the beneficiary of a pronounced honeymoon period. His first approval rating was 78% (Ragsdale 2009, 230). This is natural. Every new president begins with a period free of the criticism of the media, other politicians and the public (Erikson and Tedin 2011, 119-120). The country is remarkably fair about giving its new leaders a chance. Therefore, Johnson’s positive media coverage probably had little to do with the religious rhetoric he used in support of civil rights and much more to do with the timing of his speeches.

Finally, we can hazard some guesses about the extent of the impact of JFK’s and LBJ’s religious rhetoric on Congress. On November 20, the Judiciary Committee in the House approved Kennedy’s bill by a 20-14 vote, a significant early victory. Would Kennedy ultimately have gotten the law- or at least something resembling it- through Congress had he lived? It is difficult to say, but there is ample reason to doubt it.

For one, Kennedy’s advocacy for civil rights poisoned his relations with Congress. Shortly after Kennedy’s June address, Carl Albert (D-OK) told him that the White House had lost an important vote on a public works bill in retaliation and that civil rights was threatening to overwhelm other bills on mass transit and agriculture as well. Overall, in 1963, Congress passed only 27% of Kennedy’s proposals, one of the lowest percentages in modern times (Rorabaugh 2002, 116).

Two, after leaving the Judiciary Committee, the bill was then referred to the Rules Committee, chaired by Howard Smith (D-VA), an arch segregationist. In 1957, with civil rights legislation pending before his committee, Smith had simply disappeared, ostensibly returning to his farm to examine fire damage to one of his barns. A Republican on the committee wryly
noted, “I knew the Judge (Smith) was opposed to the civil rights bill. But I didn’t think he would commit arson to beat it” (Bernstein 1996, 48). Needless to say, Smith vowed never to let Kennedy’s civil rights package reach the House floor. If Smith only succeeded in stalling its passage, though, that might have been enough. The upcoming elections in 1964 would likely have changed the political calculations for many members, reducing their willingness to cast a risky vote with their careers now visibly on the line. And, even if the bill had made it through the House, the more formidable prospect of defeating a Senate filibuster still loomed.

Three, due to the above realities, Kennedy immediately began preparing himself and others to accept a watered down law as good enough. Mike Mansfield (D-MT), the Senate Democratic leader, had advised the President to abandon the public accommodations section of the bill, the heart of the entire law, in order to speed adoption of the rest of it. “The assumption is that it is better to secure passage of as much of the Administration’s legislative proposals on civil rights as is possible rather than to run the very real risk of losing all in an effort to obtain all,” Mansfield told Kennedy (Dallek 2003, 641). Fear of making such a bargain more difficult led Kennedy to initially oppose the great March on Washington in August, which he only reluctantly collaborated with once he accepted its inevitability. At a meeting with civil rights leaders subsequent to the day’s activities, however, Kennedy deliberately scaled back expectations. He presented those in attendance with his staff’s projected vote count, by state in the House and by member in the Senate. The picture was not pretty, especially in the upper chamber. By October, Kennedy was so depressed over this lack of progress that he privately confessed he “felt like packing his bags and leaving” (648).
Of course, Johnson faced all the same obstacles that Kennedy did. Yet Johnson had much better success in overcoming them. The legislative process for the Civil Rights Act was tortuous, marked by a blizzard of arcane legislative maneuvers. To wit, Smith famously miscalculated by adding sex to the list of prohibited discrimination in employment. Smith reasoned that the adoption of such an amendment would make the bill even more controversial than it already was, thereby splintering the tenuous coalition behind it. Instead, to Smith’s everlasting chagrin, the provision became part of the final law. The short history of the Civil Rights Act is that it was a smashing victory for the new president Johnson. The bill passed 290 to 130 in the House in February, and 73 to 27 in the Senate in June, after months of filibustering. Both tallies featured bipartisan support. Johnson was intimately involved in the process of assembling these majorities.

But as far as the impact of religious rhetoric goes, it is crucial to keep one fact in mind. Both Kennedy and Johnson offered similar, and similarly religious, rationales for the bill. Kennedy struggled mightily in Congress. He was pessimistic about his chances at the time of his death and the forecast for the bill looked bleak. Johnson, in contrast, steamrolled his opposition. A constant (the same style of religious rhetoric) cannot explain a variable (the different outcomes in Congress). If each president used the same argument, the argument cannot explain why one had more success in Congress than the other. Rather, factors like Johnson’s superior bargaining skills, the death of Kennedy himself, etc., loom as far more important to the bill’s final triumph in 1964 than the religious arguments that were made for it.
The Civil Rights Act was signed in a jubilant ceremony on July 2, 1964. Johnson gave a television address to mark the occasion (Johnson 1964s). In his speech, the President told the country that the significance of the law was that “those who are equal before God shall now also be equal in the polling booths, in the classrooms, in the factories, and in hotels, restaurants, movie theaters, and other places that provide service to the public.” Knowing that simply passing the law did not mean the nation’s work was yet complete, Johnson asked, “Let us close the springs of racial poison. Let us pray for wise and understanding hearts. Let us lay aside irrelevant differences and make our Nation whole. Let us hasten that day when our unmeasured strength and our unbounded spirit will be free to do the great works ordained for this Nation by the just and wise God who is the Father of us all.” The sentiments Johnson offered on this occasion were entirely in keeping with what he, and President Kennedy, had been saying about civil rights for the past year. The two presidents had campaigned for civil rights by referencing morality and conscience, by citing Scripture, by creating martyrs, by warning of heavenly judgment and by calling for days of prayer. Few policies were ever couched in stronger religious terms.

This is one case where it is very tempting to ascribe an important causal role to religious rhetoric. However, a closer examination must lead us to question whether these types of claims and arguments had any sort of discernable impact. In terms of approval, although Johnson’s speeches cannot fairly be analyzed, Kennedy’s religious rhetoric on June 11 certainly did not provide any boost and, indeed, may actually have caused a downtick in his support instead. When it comes to opinion on the issue, the greater likelihood is not that religious rhetoric was
persuasive, but rather that American attitudes were in the midst of a long-term, gradual move towards greater acceptance. In terms of the media, none of the major speeches attracted much attention. Kennedy’s coverage may have been positive… but it was heavily skewed by favorable commentary from the *New York Times*, a source inclined to support him on civil rights regardless of the type of rhetoric he used. Johnson’s coverage also may have been positive… but this was expected, given the typical media response to a president in a honeymoon period. Again, like Kennedy and the *Times*, rhetoric seems to have had little to do with it. Finally, in terms of Congress, each president made the same kind of religious arguments, which makes it very doubtful that this language was important to the outcome. Johnson was much more successful than Kennedy, even though they embraced the same religious themes. Other factors are therefore needed to explain that difference.

In the end, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a tremendous achievement for both men and one which they each deserve some amount of credit for. But, this chapter concludes there is little reason to suspect that in another universe, where religious arguments were not made, the result would have been any different.
Chapter 10

Have Mercy: Gerald Ford's Religious Rhetoric on the Nixon Pardon

Former President Gerald Ford died on December 26, 2006. Ford’s passing was accompanied by a litany of glowing appraisals of his time in office, all of which highlighted the bold foresight Ford had displayed when he pardoned former President Richard Nixon for all Watergate related criminal activity in September of 1974. The Washington Post’s (2006) staff editorial is a fitting example of the quality of these tributes. The Post wrote, “Today, with the passions of the period greatly diminished, it’s hard to recall how much discord that decision (the pardon), created, even among those who believed Mr. Ford to be a trustworthy successor to Mr. Nixon. It’s also hard, from today’s vantage point, to see how an indictment and trial would have done the country much good. The pardon may have come too soon and been too broad, but it was basically the right thing to do.”

Praise for the pardon was freely offered by leading political figures as well. In an op-ed, Republican Bob Dole wrote, “His legacy will be that he stopped the national hemorrhaging over Watergate. A man of courage and integrity, he made the tough choice of pardoning Richard Nixon, which helped heal the nation but very likely cost him the 1976 election. He showed his willingness to put the country’s interest first” (Dole 2006). From the other side of the aisle, liberal Justice John Paul Stevens seconded Dole’s opinion. Stevens said Ford was “a wise president who had the courage to make unpopular decisions that would serve the country’s best interests in the long run. Time has proved that his decision to pardon Richard Nixon was such a decision” (Stout and Zeleny 2006).
In truth, the perception of the pardon had begun to change well before Ford’s death. The best evidence of this change was that in 2001 Ford received the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage award for his decision. Sen. Ted Kennedy himself made the presentation. Kennedy had been a fierce and outspoken critic of the pardon at the time. He said then that the pardon “led many Americans to believe it was a culmination of the Watergate cover-up” and that it was “the wrong time, the wrong place and the wrong person” (Witcover 1974). Now with the benefit of hindsight, Kennedy had a different perspective on things: “At a time of national turmoil, our nation was fortunate to have him prepared to take over the helm of the storm-tossed ship of state. President Ford recognized that the nation had to get on with its business and could not, if there was a continuing effort to prosecute former President Nixon. So he made a tough decision and pardoned Richard Nixon. I was one of those who spoke out against his action. But time has a way of clarifying things, and now we see he was right” (Feldman 2002).

It is instructive to compare the acclaim surrounding the pardon in 2006 with the reaction that it originally provoked in 1974. The New York Times (1974a) immediately called it “an inappropriate and premature grant of clemency” and the paper claimed that the pardon “affronted the Constitution and the American system of justice.” The Times argued that Ford had “failed in his duty to the Republic, made a mockery of the claim of equal justice before the law, promoted renewed historical discord, made possible the clouding of the historical record, and undermined the humane values he sought to invoke.” When the President appeared in Pittsburgh the day after, an angry crowd greeted him with chants of “Jail Ford, Jail Ford, Jail Ford!” A man from Alabama filed suit seeking to have the Twenty Fifth Amendment, the means by which Ford had
become President, declared unconstitutional (Greene 1995, 53). Ford’s press secretary, Jerald terHorst, a friend of the President’s for over a quarter of a century and his very first appointment, self-servingly resigned in protest. The California bar voted 347 to 169 to condemn the decision (Berthelsen 1974). The ACLU hysterically exploded “If Ford’s principle had been the rule in Nuremberg, the Nazi leaders would have been let off and only the people who carried out their schemes would have been tried” (Cannon 1994, 384). And so it went.

Ford chose a religious rhetorical strategy to persuade the country that the time had come to let go of Watergate. These anecdotes provide only the briefest glimpse at just how spectacularly this strategy failed.

Ford may not have been the most inspiring orator among the post-war presidents, but he was one of the most consistently religious. A privately devout Episcopalian, Ford was very comfortable speaking the language of faith. For example, typically when Ford discussed the benefits of American diversity he did so by means of the biblical metaphor of the Egyptian Joseph’s “coat of many colors,” a beautiful garment given to him by his father as a sign of affection (Gen 37). The nature of Ford’s point was usually something like the following: “To form a more perfect Union- and that is what we want- we need to learn more of our country and more of our good people. Americans must appreciate the diversity of our land and the diversity

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16 My personal favorite example of the often silly rhetoric Ford employed came at the annual convention for the Future Farmers of America in Kansas City in 1974: “Now some have said that instead of asking Congress and the Nation to bite the bullet, I offered only a marshmallow. Well, I had already asked the Congress to postpone for 3 months a 5.5 percent pay increase for Federal Government employees which would have saved $700 million. Congress wouldn’t even chew that marshmallow. They haven’t, as yet, shown much appetite for some of the other ‘marshmallows’ in my latest message. But if they don’t like the menu, I may be back with some tough turkey” (Ford 1974g).
of our citizens. There is a quotation that I learned in my early days in Sunday school, that the beauty of Joseph’s coat is its many colors. And that is the strength of America” (Ford 1975d, see also Ford 1975c; Ford 1976e; Ford 1976f).

Ford also often used religious rhetoric when trying to place the nation’s Bicentennial in its proper historical context. For instance, in his speech in Philadelphia on July 4, 1976, Ford at some length explained the meaning of the little known Biblical verse found on the Liberty Bell:

Before me is the great bronze bell that joyously rang out the news of the birth of our Nation from the steeple of the State House. It was never intended to be a church bell. Yet a generation before the great events of 1776, the elected assembly of Pennsylvania ordered it to be inscribed with this Biblical verse: “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.”

The American settlers had many, many hardships, but they had more liberty than any other people on Earth. That was what they came for and what they meant to keep. The verse from Leviticus on the Liberty Bell refers to the ancient Jewish year of Jubilee. In every 50th year, the Jubilee restored the land and the equality of persons that prevailed when the children of Israel entered the land of promise, and both gifts came from God, as the Jubilee regularly reminded them.

Our Founding Fathers knew their Bibles as well as their Blackstone. They boldly reversed the age-old political theory that kings derive their powers from God and asserted that both powers and unalienable rights belong to the people as direct endowments from their Creator (Ford 1976d).

Furthermore, Ford located the Bicentennial in the Christian and Jewish calendars in the opening to his 1976 State of the Union address (Ford 1976a) and he made the event the dominant theme of his remarks to that year’s national prayer breakfast (Ford 1976b) and religious broadcasters convention (Ford 1976c). According to the typology established in Chapter 2, however, we would classify this rhetoric as ceremonial, and not instrumental.
Ford did not shy away from instrumental usages either, but at times he happened to fall a bit short of a full embrace of a religious rhetorical strategy. A case in point would be Ford’s rhetoric on aid to South Vietnam. As the North Vietnamese began what would ultimately be their final offensive in early 1975, Ford made a last ditch attempt to persuade Congress to authorize additional financial assistance for the beleaguered South. Frequently, Ford couched his argument in religious terms. Before a conference in San Diego on April 3, in a performance calling to mind Eisenhower, Ford claimed that America’s religious heritage enjoined foreign aid, quoted what most people think to be a Bible verse (helping people help themselves) and made a vague reference to “prophets of doom,” a phrase with readily apparent religious connotations: “We will go on helping people to help themselves. It is in keeping with our religious heritage, our decency, and our own self-interest. We will preserve partnerships with people striving for freedom on a global basis. I reject the prophets of doom who see nothing but depression at home and despair abroad. I will reject any advice to pull down the Stars and Stripes and sail home from the seas of the world to the safe anchorage of San Diego Bay” (Ford 1975a). Similarly, in his remarks to a dinner that week in San Francisco, Ford said, “Now, I am convinced that Americans are determined to go on helping people in less fortunate lands to help themselves. We retain our religious heritage, our decency as human beings, and our own self-interest. Of course, those are the fundamentals. We will assist the refugees of Vietnam in any appropriate way, and we will not turn our backs on any other peoples who are victims of comparable disasters” (Ford 1975b).

What Ford did not do, however, is use religious rhetoric in his major address on Vietnamese aid on April 10. As such, this campaign falls short of the criteria that would lead us
to classify it as a religious strategy. In any event, Ford’s lobbying made little difference. Congress had absolutely zero interest in prolonging the painful end to America’s worst foreign policy disaster; Saigon would fall by the end of the month.

Ford’s rhetoric on Watergate, on the other hand, was much more than sporadically religious. The word “Watergate” has morphed into a catch-all term representing a variety of Nixon Administration misdeeds, including the illegal wiretapping of news reporters, the political abuse of the IRS, the creation of a White House “enemies list” and the raiding of the office of Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist. It was Ellsberg, a former Defense Department official, who had leaked the damaging Pentagon Papers, a document that exposed Vietnam War deceptions, to the press. The Watergate break-in itself, however, occurred in the early morning hours of Saturday, June 17, 1972. Acting on the tip of a suspicious night watchman, D.C. police apprehended five men inside the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate complex. The men were wearing surgical gloves and apparently were attempting to install or modify electronic surveillance equipment inside the offices. Two other men were located across the street running logistics at the Howard Johnson Hotel. To this day, its unclear what exactly the burglars were looking for.

Four of the men arrested in the DNC offices were past CIA Cuban employees. The fifth, James McCord, was a former agent who was also the chief of security for the President’s re-election organization, the Committee to Reelect the President, later known by the unfortunate acronym CREEP. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy were the men across the street. Both had worked for the White House and Liddy had been counsel to CREEP’s finance committee.
Therefore there were plenty of lines running from the break-in back to the Administration, lines that Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein publicly revealed in a *Washington Post* story two days later.

But the truth is that no one seemed to care, at least not at first. Nixon’s contemptuous press secretary Ron Ziegler quickly labeled the crime a “third-rate burglary attempt”- and this characterization seemed more accurate to the public than George McGovern’s claim that the Nixon White House was “the most corrupt Administration in our national history.” Despite the indictment of all seven of the perpetrators on September 15, Nixon cruised towards re-election. He would destroy McGovern 61% to 38%, losing only Massachusetts and the District of Columbia.

The good times would be extremely short-lived. In February of 1973, the Senate voted to establish the Select Committee on Presidential Campaign Activities, led by respected Democratic Senator Sam Ervin. In March, James McCord wrote a letter to the judge presiding over his case, John Sirica, claiming that political pressure had been applied to coerce him and his fellow defendants into remaining silent. He alleged that others who had been involved in the break-in had not been identified. For some this was the turning point in the scandal. After Sirica’s tough-love sentences were handed down on the Watergate defendants, Nixon’s aides scrambled to negotiate deals with prosecutors. With the pressure on him mounting, Nixon was forced to accept the resignations of H.R. Haldeman, his chief of staff, John Ehrlichman, his top domestic advisor, and Richard Kleindienst, his attorney general, at the end of April. By May, the Ervin committee had opened its hearings with damaging testimony from McCord and others. And in
June, White House counsel John Dean testified before the committee that there had been a massive cover-up of the break-in, and Nixon himself had been at the center of it.

After the existence of a secret White House taping system was revealed in July, the scandal transitioned into a fight for the tapes. Those tapes could prove who was telling the truth, Nixon or Dean? After negotiations over the tapes fell apart in October, Robert Bork, the No. 3 employee in the Justice Department, fired special prosecutor Archibald Cox on Nixon’s orders after Attorney General Eliot Richardson and his subordinate William Ruckelshaus both had resigned rather than doing so. The resignations and the firing became known as the “Saturday Night Massacre.” Impeachment at this point was close to inevitable.

The fight over which tapes would be provided and whether transcripts would be considered sufficient, however, continued well into July 1974. But then on the 24th, in a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court ruled in *United States of America v. Richard M. Nixon, President* that executive privilege cannot supersede the demands of due process and a fair administration of criminal justice. Nixon had to turn over the tapes. On August 5th, the White House released transcripts of the June 23, 1972 meetings between Nixon and Haldeman, the “smoking gun” tapes, which provide incontrovertible evidence that the two had conspired to block the FBI’s investigation into Watergate. As a result, whatever support remained for Nixon evaporated. The President announced his resignation at 9 P.M. on August 8. A little after noon the next day, Nixon flashed his famous “V” for victory signal and hopped in a helicopter, flying off into exile (though, as it would turn out, not forever).
As it was, Ford did not even enter this story until the fall of 1973. At that time, Vice President Spiro Agnew was under investigation for crimes unrelated to Watergate. Prior to joining Nixon’s team, Agnew had accepted more than $100,000 in kickbacks for public works contracts awarded while he was a Baltimore country executive and Governor of Maryland. Facing forty indictable charges, Agnew cut a deal and resigned on October 10. Nixon nominated Ford as his replacement three days later.

Ford was mostly kept in the dark about the happenings within the Nixon White House. His main role was as a cheerleader, a defender, an apologist, a man who could travel the country and make speeches proclaiming Nixon’s innocence. Unfortunately for Ford, though, Watergate ultimately became his mess. It was up to him to move the country forward after over two years of scandalous revelations. This was his first, and arguably most essential, objective as President. Ford later remembered spending “about 25 percent of my time listening to lawyers argue what I should do with Mr. Nixon’s papers, his tapes, et cetera. At the very same time, our country was faced with serious economic problems, inflation, higher interest rates, unemployment going up. And we had allies that were uncertain as to what would happen. And the Soviet Union- we never knew what they might do in this change of presidency” (Mieczkowski 2005, 30). Ford could not deal with any of these questions with the ghost of Watergate hovering over him.

Ford was stepping into a difficult situation in other ways as well. It bears repeating that he had never run for national office. His vice-presidency was unelected. Ford thus was confronted with the urgent task of building up the support he would need to govern and be re-elected in just two short years. “I have no solid coalition of support outside of southwestern
Michigan and no working relationships outside of the House,” Ford honestly acknowledged (Smith and Smith 1994, 122). This was a reality that had to change, and change quickly, if his presidency was to be successful.

Hence, again, the crisis condition is met. Ford was inheriting a country in turmoil due to an unprecedented presidential scandal, pressing problems could not be addressed so long as that scandal lingered, and he had a meager political base from which to operate from. The stage was set for the possible appearance of religious rhetoric.

In truth, Ford began his campaign to move the country past Watergate with his very first speech as president (Ford 1974a). It was an address packed with powerful religious references. Shortly after Nixon had departed, a select group gathered in the East Room of the White House to witness Ford’s swearing in by Chief Justice Warren Burger. The speech is mainly remembered for Ford’s classic line, “My fellow Americans, our long national nightmare is over.” Few have stopped to acknowledge, however, that what those words really mean is that Ford was already signaling his goal of putting Watergate behind them. Religious rhetoric was the means by which he was attempting to accomplish this.

Ford began by noting the unusual circumstances he found himself in. Reflecting on the fact that he had not been elected, Ford beseeched the country for its spiritual support instead: “I am acutely aware that you have not elected me as your President by your ballots, and so I ask you to confirm me as your President with your prayers. And I hope that such prayers will also be the first of many.” After some brief comments on the type of relationships he wished to
construct with Congress and the world, Ford made a sincere plea for mercy on the behalf of Richard Nixon:

> Our Constitution works; our great Republic is a government of laws and not of men. Here the people rule. But there is a higher Power, by whatever name we honor Him, who ordains not only righteousness but love, not only justice but mercy.¹⁷

As we bind up the internal wounds of Watergate, more painful and more poisonous than those of foreign wars, let us restore the golden rule to our political process, and let brotherly love purge our hearts of suspicion and of hate.

In the beginning, I asked you to pray for me. Before closing, I ask again your prayers, for Richard Nixon and for his family. May our former President, who brought peace to millions, find it for himself. May God bless and comfort his wonderful wife and daughters, whose love and loyalty will forever be a shining legacy to all who bear the lonely burdens of the White House.

In some ways, this section of the address was a brave choice. By speaking so openly about his former boss, Ford was reminding the country that he, too, had been a member of the fallen Administration, that he, himself, was an ally and a friend of the disgraced former President. Nevertheless, Ford very clearly calls for the country to be merciful towards Nixon, to actively pray for him, reminding the public that “a higher Power” demands this of them.

Mercy, of course, is a recurrent and unmistakable religious theme. Often, in the Bible mercy is depicted as an attribute of God, who will be merciful towards his flock. One way in which he is said to be so is through the forgiveness of sins. “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful

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¹⁷ As an aside, Ford would reuse these exact lines a little over a week later when he announced his clemency program for those who had avoided the draft: “As minority leader of the House and recently as Vice President, I stated my strong conviction that unconditional, blanket amnesty for anyone who illegally evaded or fled military service is wrong. It is wrong. Yet, in my first words as President of all the people, I acknowledged a Power, higher than the people, Who commands not only righteousness but love, not only justice but mercy” (Ford 1974b)
and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Ex 34: 6-7; see a similar passage in Ps 86: 15).

For humans, mercy means taking compassion on the downtrodden, particularly so when they have no claim to such compassion or when their suffering is undeserved. In many instances, Jesus provided examples of this behavior by acting in a merciful way himself. A woman whose daughter is “tormented by a demon” requested Christ’s mercy and, after her persistence, he healed the child (see Mt 15: 21-28). A father asked Christ to have mercy on his epileptic son and Jesus cured him, too (Mt 17: 14-20). Jesus also cleansed ten lepers (Lk 17: 11-19) and restored sight to a blind man (Lk 18: 35-43), simply because they had faith and called for his mercy.

The link between the two Biblical themes- God’s mercy and Christ’s acts of mercy- is that Jesus was teaching his followers that if they want mercy themselves from God, they need to give it first, just like forgiveness (see the next chapter). In the parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18: 23-35), Jesus tells the story of a king settling accounts with his slaves. One man owed him a great sum that he could not afford and so the king ordered that he, his wife, his children and his possessions all be sold. The man fell on his knees, asked for “patience,” and the king relented, forgiving the debt. However, the slave later encountered a fellow servant owing him money but he refused that man’s pleas for forbearance, throwing him into jail. When the king found out, he grew angry and had the man tortured. The message of the parable lies in the
question the king asked, “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?”

Thus, by speaking forcefully about the need for mercy, Ford’s rhetoric transfused with religious precepts that a majority of Americans would be familiar with. Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. One can hear these sayings in churches across the country every single Sunday. And, as we shall soon see, Ford would return to this specific argument on several later occasions when speaking about his ultimate move to pardon Nixon.

On another note, in the section excerpted above Ford additionally invokes the Biblical terminology of the golden rule and asks for an infusion of “brotherly love” into the country’s politics. In a sense, these words stand as a denunciation of Nixon and his dirty tricks. It would be hard to say that Nixon treated others as he wished to be treated himself and “suspicion” and “hate” came to define Nixon’s political career. Ford was making this point, though, in a forward-looking manner. Ford was not fixated on the lessons of the past, but rather he was highlighting what the country could do in the future “As we bind up the internal wounds of Watergate.” This, of course, was Ford’s intent. Therefore, these phrases also have another purpose; a call for everyone to let bygones be bygones, to, again, show compassion for Nixon and in doing so to “purge our hearts of… hate” that we felt for him. Hence, the usage of the concepts of brotherly love and the golden rule has two effects; it reminded the audience that Nixon failed to do these things while at the same time asking that they not repeat the former president’s mistakes with respect to Watergate.

Ford closed his remarks by acknowledging his own dependence on God’s help: “I now
solemnly reaffirm my promise I made to you last December 6: to uphold the Constitution, to do what is right as God gives me to see the right, and to do the very best I can for America. God helping me, I will not let you down.”

At his first press conference on August 28, Ford (1974c) publicly revealed that he was open to considering a pardon: “I am not ruling it out. It is an option and a proper option for any President.” He refused, however, to commit to issuing one, saying only that he would consider the matter later at the appropriate date. As it was, Ford apparently had already concluded that a pardon was, indeed, his only road out of the Watergate morass. Ford’s thinking on the matter had evolved gradually. At his confirmation hearings in 1973, Ford had been questioned about the possibility of a pardon. At that point in time, Ford had said “I don’t think the American people would stand for it.”

Before ascending to the office, though, Ford had met with Alexander Haig, Haldeman’s replacement as chief of staff, on August 1, 1974. Haig laid out a number of possible scenarios for the upcoming weeks, the final one being that Nixon would agree to leave office in return for a promise of a pardon. Ford did not immediately reject the idea, but he did call Haig the following day, with witnesses present, to emphasize that there would be no deal.

The situation was no less complicated a month later. Ford knew well that a preemptive pardon, made before Nixon had even been put to trial, would hint that a corrupt bargain had surely been made. What other choice did he have though? Ford later remarked, “I felt I had come to the conclusion that I had an obligation- which was my own decision- to spend 100
percent of my time on the problems of 230 million people, rather than 25% of my time on the problems of one man” (Brinkley 2007, 73).

The only issue left unresolved was how to present his decision. Early on the morning of Sunday, September 8, the White House informed the press to expect a major announcement from the President shortly. Ford then proceeded to take Communion during services at St. John’s Episcopal Church in Washington. “I wanted to go to church and pray for guidance and understanding before making the announcement,” Ford said (Cannon 1994, 382). He also specifically chose to speak on Sunday, it was later revealed, to symbolically represent that the pardon was an act of mercy, and not an act of justice (Herbers 1974a). As Ford left the church, a reporter asked him what was up. Ford cryptically answered, “You will find out soon enough” (Greene 1995, 52). At 11:00 AM, the President appeared on national television in a prerecorded broadcast (Ford 1974d).

Two things immediately jump out about this speech. The first is how consistently Ford framed his decision to pardon Nixon as foremost a matter between him and his God. In fact, Ford’s very opening line was, “I have come to a decision which I felt I should tell you and all of my fellow American citizens, as soon as I was certain in my own mind and in my own conscience that it is the right thing to do.” Later, in a key section, Ford continued along this line of reasoning:

I have asked your help and your prayers, not only when I became President but many times since. The Constitution is the supreme law of our land and it governs our actions as citizens. Only the laws of God, which govern our consciences, are superior to it.
As we are a nation under God, so I am sworn to uphold our laws with the help of God. And I have sought such guidance and searched my own conscience with special diligence to determine the right thing for me to do with respect to my predecessor in this place, Richard Nixon, and his loyal wife and family.

Their is an American tragedy in which we all have played a part. It could go on and on and on, or someone must write the end to it. I have concluded that only I can do that, and if I can, I must.

Further into the speech, Ford would again emphasize how much of a role his conscience played in leading him to this decision.

As President, my primary concern must always be the greatest good of all the people of the United States whose servant I am. As a man, my first consideration is to be true to my own convictions and my own conscience.

My conscience tells me clearly and certainly that I cannot prolong the bad dreams that continue to reopen a chapter that is closed. My conscience tells me that only I, as President, have the constitutional power to firmly shut and seal this book. My conscience tells me it is my duty, not merely to proclaim domestic tranquility but to use every means that I have to insure it.

I do believe that the buck stops here, that I cannot rely upon public opinion polls to tell me what is right.

I do believe that right makes might and that if I am wrong, 10 angels swearing I was right would make no difference.

The word “conscience” appears in the body of the speech seven times. “God” is used five times. Ford thus presented the pardon as a decision made based upon prayer, and not on political or judicial considerations. Ford was claiming that his relationship with God did not just help him make the decision, instead it more or less made the decision for him. His conscience could allow nothing else. It was a provocative argument to make. Nearly every American would
have had an opinion on what should happen to Nixon now that he had abdicated his office. But Ford was in some sense saying that only his own sense of morality counted.

The second significant aspect of this speech is that Ford reiterated the pleas for mercy that he had first made on August 9. At various times throughout the address, Ford spoke of a number of hardships that continued prosecution would impose on the fallen President. Ford pointed out, “it is common knowledge that serious allegations and accusations hang like a sword over our former President’s head, threatening his health as he tries to reshape his life, a great part of which was spent in the service of this country and by the mandate of its people.” He argued that in a public trial, “instead of enjoying equal treatment with any other citizen accused of violating the law, (Nixon) would be cruelly and excessively penalized either in preserving the presumption of his innocence or in obtaining a speedy determination of his guilt in order to repay a legal debt to society.” Ford claimed that Nixon’s fate “deeply troubles every decent and every compassionate person.” Ford also expressed his opinion “that Richard Nixon and his loved ones have suffered enough and will continue to suffer, no matter what I do, no matter what we, as a great and good nation, can do together to make his goal of peace come true.” Having built up sympathy for Nixon with these references to the ex-President’s health, to a trial being a cruel and excessive penalty, to his suffering, Ford finally made the point that if we want mercy from God ourselves, we must be prepared to give it first. “I do believe, with all my heart and mind and spirit, that I, not as President but as a humble servant of God, will receive justice without mercy if I fail to show mercy,” Ford said. This point is a lesson of the parable discussed above and multiple Biblical passages make it even more explicitly. For instance, in James 2: 13: “For
judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy.” The same injunction is also one of the Beatitudes, the list of people who Christ said enjoyed God’s special favor in his Sermon on the Mount. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy” (Mt 5: 7). The Beatitude sayings are some of most well-known quotes in all of Scripture (i.e. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth”). Thus, the listeners at home were once more led to make the connection that not only Ford, but they, too, had to be merciful towards Nixon.

One hint that this was a strategic argument that Ford had chosen to make lies in what he did not say. Ford’s real reasons for issuing the pardon had little to do with the dictates of his own conscience and everything to do with the burden Nixon’s unresolved status was placing on his administration. Ford’s own words serve as testament to that fact. But Ford did not talk about the 25% of his time that he was spending on the problems of one man. He talked about religion instead, presumably because he felt the American people would be more receptive to such thinking.

The pardon speech is one of the most religious speeches in all of American presidential history; from its setting, on a Sunday morning right after the President had gone to worship, to its abundant references to God, conscience and mercy. As the later opinion and media analyses will clearly show, this particular speech should fairly be considered a public relations disaster. It must be acknowledged, though, that this is likely at least partly due to the surprise nature of the announcement.

No one outside the White House had any expectation that a pardon would be issued this quickly into Ford’s term in office, barely a month after he was sworn in. In fact, key people
within the White House itself did not even know about it; press secretary terHorst did not learn a pardon was in the works until the day before, arguably so as to protect him from having to be evasive with reporters. Ford, for his part, had stressed at his August 28 press conference that he was determined to let the judicial process run its course. That obviously was not what happened.

White House staffers unanimously agreed that the bolt from the blue nature of the pardon undercut Ford’s credibility with both the press and the public (Rozell 1993, 465-476). Ford was seen as an uncommonly open politician and the pardon had been a closed process. As Ford aide John Hushen admitted, “we delivered it (the pardon) to the country like Pearl Harbor” (467). It was exactly this kind of lack of acuity with the press that allowed Ford, an all-American lineman at Michigan and by far the most athletic man ever to sit in the Oval Office, to become caricaturized as a stumbling klutz.

Regardless, the pardon had made a bad situation worse and Ford spun into damage control. In containing the public’s anger, Ford would not alter his justifications for acting. Ford implicitly addressed the controversy in a well-publicized speech he gave at the World Golf Hall of Fame on September 11. Ford chose to use the sport as an example of type of feeling he was trying to foster throughout the country. Ford explained, “But there is still one more lesson to be learned from golf. And I have never seen a tournament, regardless of how much money, or how much fame, or prestige, or emotion was ever involved, that didn’t end with the victor extending his hand to the vanquished. I have enjoyed sitting there watching on television the pat on the back, the arm around the shoulder, the praise for what was done right, and the sympathetic nod
for what wasn’t. These are as much a part of golf as life itself, and I would hope that understanding and reconciliation are not limited to the 19th hole” (Ford 1974e).

The use of the word “reconciliation” is what makes these remarks important. Reconciliation is a concept with strong religious overtones. Many passages throughout the Bible speak of the importance of being reconciled to God (for instance, 2 Cor 5: 11-21). And for Catholics, Reconciliation- confessing and repenting for one’s sins- is one of the seven sacraments of the faith.

Ford held his second press conference on September 16 (Ford 1974f). The conference was nationally televised. As Ford remembers, he was “hoping to explain the pardon rationale more clearly” (Ford 1979, 180). The pardon, as expected, dominated the questioning; seventeen of the twenty two questions had at least something to do with Nixon. Before any of those questions could be posed, however, Ford opened the conference with an unusual statement:

Ladies and gentlemen, this press conference is being held at a time when many Americans are observing the Jewish religious New Year. It begins a period of self-examination and reconciliation. In opening this press conference, I am mindful that the spirit of this holy day has a meaning for all Americans.

In examining one’s deeds of the last year and in assuming responsibility for past actions and personal decisions, one can reach a point of growth and change. The purpose of looking back is to go forward with a new and enlightened dedication to our highest values.

The record of the past year does not have to be endlessly relived, but can be transformed by commitment to new insights and new actions in the year to come.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am ready for your questions.
Ford, like Clinton after him (see the following chapter), had branched into religious rhetoric outside the bounds of Christianity. The President’s mention of the “Jewish religious New Year” was a reference to start of the High Holy Days that began with Rosh Hashanah, an observance falling on the very same day as the press conference. As Ford correctly said, for Jewish Americans the following ten days would be ten days of prayer, repentance and self-examination. This is not necessarily a joyous time for Jews, but instead a serious one, a time in which they think deeply about their relationship with God and consider ways that they can better themselves in the year to come. The Rosh Hashanah service itself is marked by the sounding of a shofar, an ancient wind instrument made from the horn of a ram. This call symbolizes worshippers being reawakened to their moral responsibilities.

By making a rhetorical connection between the pardon and these religious rituals, Ford was re-emphasizing his message that it was time to move beyond Watergate, time to, metaphorically speaking, begin a “new year.” All of his comments in this opening statement were forward-looking. For instance, “The purpose of looking back is to go forward with a new and enlightened dedication to our highest values.” Or, “The record of the past year does not have to be endlessly relived, but can be transformed by commitment to new insights and new actions in the year to come.”

Ford’s specific question answers were much more practically oriented than his remarks on the 8th. This time he did stress the fact that the distractions a trial would pose were the primary reason that he granted Nixon a pardon. However, he also continued to prioritize the role his own conscience played in the decision-making process as well. In response to one query,
Ford defended himself by claiming “Every action I have taken… is predicated on my conscience without any concern or consideration as to favor as far as I am concerned.” Towards the end of the availability, Ford emphasized, “And since I was the only one who could make that decision, I thought I had to search my own soul after consulting with a limited number of people.”

Nevertheless, Ford was still unsuccessful in his efforts to quiet the unrest his actions had caused. In mid-September, Congresswoman Bella Abzug (D-NY) led a group of representatives who submitted a House resolution calling for more information on the pardon. John Conyers (D-MI) followed suit with a similar resolution of his own. William Hungate (D-MO), chair of the Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, responded to these resolutions with a written request to the President, asking that he answer a number of specific questions. Ignoring the advice of almost all of his staff, Ford agreed to respond to the questions in person before the Committee. This was a move almost without historical precedent; no president had testified in person before Congress in the post-Civil War era (Greene 1995, 57).

The two-hour hearing was held on October 17 and was broadcast live nationally (Ford 1974h). Ford opened the hearing with a lengthy statement. He had made a strong religious argument by the sixth paragraph:

> We would needlessly be diverted from meeting those challenges if we as a people were to remain sharply divided over whether to indict, bring to trial, and punish a former President, who already is condemned to suffer long and deeply in the shame and disgrace brought upon the office he held. Surely, we are not a revengeful people. We have often demonstrated a readiness to feel compassion and to act out of mercy. As a people, we have a long record of forgiving even those who have been our country’s most destructive foes.

Yet, to forgive is not to forget the lessons of evil in whatever ways evil has operated against us. And certainly the pardon granted the former President
will not cause us to forget the evils of Watergate-type offenses or to forget the lessons we have learned that a government which deceives its supporters and treats its opponents as enemies must never, never be tolerated.

On yet another high-profile occasion, Ford had emphasized the importance of being merciful, the concept itself certainly being received in a religious context due to Ford’s earlier remarks. Mainly, though, the questioning and Ford’s comments focused on precise issues of information, dates, etc. Mostly the appearance was cordial, with the exception of freshman Rep. Elizabeth Holtzman (D-NY) who more or less berated the President with a series of long-winded, leading and accusatory “questions.” In a climactic moment, Ford interrupted the Congresswoman’s tirade with visible anger, pounding the table as he exclaimed, “there was no deal, period, under no circumstances.”

After his testimony, Ford did not exert much more effort in defense of the pardon. Ford had certainly used a religious rhetorical strategy up until then. His public statements on Nixon repeatedly diverged from his actual rationale for pardoning the ex-President, highlighting religious ideals like mercy and conscience over the argument that the prospect of a trial was occupying too much of his and the country’s important time. But, as I’ve alluded to throughout this section, neither the public, nor the press, nor Congress was buying it.

Most damaging to Ford in the long-term was the impact that the pardon had on his public approval rating. As the trend lines in Chart 10.1 show, the pardon was a turning point in Ford’s presidency. It triggered a steep decline in his support, and it was a decline from which he never recovered. In Gallup’s first poll, Americans approved of Ford’s performance after one week in office by a margin of 71% to 3%. The day after the pardon, Ford’s rating was down to 66%. By
September 27, Ford was down to 50%. He had fallen 21 points. Ford’s religious rhetoric on September 8 was therefore met with a precipitous and statistically significant decline in his approval rating. Despite Ford’s articulation of religious arguments on national television on a number of other occasions - the press conference on September 16, his Congressional testimony on October 17 - the tide did not change.

Issue-specific data is limited in this case. Yet, what is available is very revealing. For one, Ford’s early attempts at burying the past under an avalanche of religious language (mainly his quasi-inaugural) did not make the public any more forgiving of Nixon’s trespasses. In a survey taken the week of September 6, two days before the pardon would be given, Louis Harris (1974a) asked the public, “Do you think President Ford should pardon former President Nixon
on the grounds he has suffered enough, or do you think such a pardon would be wrong?” Respondents opposed a pardon made for this reason by a margin of 57% to 35%. After the pardon was granted, Harris (1974b) asked whether survey participants felt that Ford’s actions were “right or wrong?” Opinion proved to be very stable. 60% of respondents said the pardon was “wrong” while only 33% of people said it was “right.” These numbers are very similar to the data collected right before the pardon, indicating that Ford’s religious justifications had failed to change many minds. Other outlets reported similar findings. Roper (1974) found that 54% of people disapproved of the pardon at the end of September versus the 30% who approved of it. The results also continued to be very stable throughout the coming months. Over the first week of November, Harris (1974c) again asked its interviewees how they felt about the pardon. 61% gave Ford negative marks for it; 33% gave the President positive marks for it.

What emerges then is a picture of a public that opposed a pardon by a margin of about 60% to 35% over the duration of Ford’s religious rhetorical strategy. His pleas to be merciful seem to have been ignored. Worst of all for Ford is that opinion on his overall objective, ending Watergate, went against him as well. In that same final survey, Harris also asked if participants agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “Now that Nixon has been pardoned, the country can rightfully close the book on the Watergate case.” The respondents overwhelmingly disagreed, by a margin of 66% to 27%.

Before moving on, it is worth looking at two other representations of public opinion for some further insight. The results of subsequent elections can stand as an imperfect indicator of the impact of the pardon on public opinion. In the 1974 midterms, with the pardon not even two
months in the past, the Democrats picked up 43 seats in the House, 3 in the Senate and 4 more governorships. This tidal wave left the Democrats with a Senate majority of 23 and a House majority of 147. More strikingly, however, is that Ford most certainly lost the 1976 election as a result of his decision. Ford lost the popular vote to Jimmy Carter by just 2 percent. In exit polls, 7% of respondents said they voted against Ford because of the pardon (Small 1999, 301).

Additionally, as a last piece of opinion information, mail and call counts are a questionable statistic but they may contribute to the overall picture nonetheless. For what it is worth, the White House received 4,000 letters the week after the announcement. Less than 700 complimented the President’s decision (Ford 1979, 180). Out of 30,000 messages in total, six of every seven would take a stand against Ford (Mieczkowski 2005, 30). Calls were even worse; the switchboard ran eight to one against the pardon (Brinkley 2007, 68). Letters sent to the Los Angeles Times (1974b) followed the same basic pattern. On September 14, the paper reported having received 1,186 letters criticizing the pardon. In contrast, the paper received just 58 letters supporting it.

In sum, Ford’s own approval rating tanked, the public consistently opposed the pardon, his party took a shellacking in the upcoming election and calls and mail flooded the White House and major papers expressing their opposition. It would be hard to find religious rhetoric that was more unsuccessful with the public than this.

Although Ford addressed Watergate with religious language in three nationally televised events, it only really makes sense to analyze the media coverage that pertains to his pardon announcement speech. Ford’s August 9 speech was his very first as president and, as such,
coverage was logically dominated by information about Nixon, and not Ford. And Ford’s remarks to open the hearing on October 17 were obviously qualitatively different, due to their setting, than a typical major speech. Therefore, I have only coded the articles surrounding Ford’s speech on September 8.

In short, the editorial reaction to Ford’s pardon announcement was as bad as could possibly be imagined. Table 10.1 summarizes the carnage. The average score of the editorials printed in the four papers was 1.73, the lowest mean to be found in any of this dissertation’s nine case studies. Fully 37 of 45 editorials (82.2%) were negative in tone. What is worse, 29 of these pieces were scored a “1,” indicating that they were entirely hostile towards the President. This sub-total includes the immediate reactions published by the editorial boards of all four papers. The New York Times (1974a) has already been quoted earlier. The Los Angeles Times (1974a) called the pardon “a serious mistake” and wrote that “this ending goes against the principle of equal application of the law.” The first two lines of the Chicago Tribune’s (1974) staff editorial were: “Dismay and regret. These are the two words that best describe our reaction to the manner and timing of President Ford’s announcement of a full pardon for Richard Nixon.” Finally, the Washington Post (1974) commented that “But for those of us who believe that the consequences of Watergate were public consequences having to do with an office and a system of government which were not Mr. Nixon’s personal property, then this newest use of the powers of the presidency to curtail inquiry and to relieve Mr. Nixon of responsibility for this action will strike you as nothing less than a continuation of a cover-up.” The paper continued, “We do not believe Mr. Ford intended his action to have that as its primary purpose. But that will be its primary
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<td>John Lawrence</td>
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<td>George Reedy</td>
<td>“The Politics of Secrecy and Surprise”</td>
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**Dates: 9/9 – 9/15**

**Average Score**: 1.73

**Positive Articles**: 5 (11.1%)

**Negative Articles**: 37 (82.2%)

**Mixed/Neutral Articles**: 3 (6.7%)
effect.” One only need to scan the titles in the table to get a sense of how poisonous the atmosphere was for Ford in the days afterwards: “The Failure of Mr. Ford,” “The System Scorned,” “A New Kind of Cover-Up,” “An Affront, a Mockery,” “Nightmare Compounded,” “Mr. Ford’s Folly,” etc.

Just 5 positive commentaries appeared on the other side. Two of these op-eds were written by Joseph Alsop (1974a, 1974b). In the first, Alsop argued that “strong reasons of national interest… lay behind Mr. Ford’s pardon for Nixon.” He claimed that “the writers of the Constitution had just this kind of special case in mind when they granted all Presidents an unqualified right of general pardon.” Alsop held that “the sensible thing was to take the plunge and get it over with” since “it would have been dangerous, in fact, to prolong the Watergate-obsession by bringing Nixon to trial and perhaps sending him to jail.” To do so would continue to distract the country from more pressing financial problems, Alsop believed. In his second piece, Alsop focused instead on the rumors swirling about that Nixon was teetering on the brink of mental collapse. This fact, in itself, justified a pardon, according to Alsop. “It would have been a major national nightmare,” he wrote, “if the former President has slipped over the edge into a fullscale nervous breakdown.”

Obviously Alsop’s opinions were not very popular. Nearly every other author came to the opposite conclusion about the pardon. There seem to have been three general points of objection to Ford’s grant of clemency, points that were hinted at in the brief quotes already excerpted from the staff editorials above.

First, many criticized the pardon on the grounds that it undermined the principle of
equality before the law. These individuals worried about the message the pardon would send to the country. They believed that message would be that there is one set of laws for the rich and powerful, and one for everyone else, including those co-conspirators in the Watergate mess who Ford had not pardoned. Some took this concern to its logical extreme by speculating about the consequences this signal could have for the judicial system at large. Bob Wiedrich (1974) was one of these. Wiedrich wrote, “One can easily conceive of a giant rift developing with the ranks of the Justice Department, whose job it is to bring to justice and prosecute those accused of violating federal law. Prosecutors saying in good conscience ‘How can I try to put this guy in the clink for the same kind of crime for which others are being pardoned’ And it is just as easy to envision jurors refusing to convict lesser criminals under the thesis that equal justice has come to an end when those ensnared in felonious acts in a political situation are set free to go their way.” Some even decided to have a little fun with their anger. Clarence Petersen (1974), for one, facetiously suggested “Let our new President temper justice with mercy for all and pardon everyone! Our burglars, stickup men, tax cheaters, embezzlers, rapists, and murderers- all of them hounded into jail by hostile policemen and prosecutors- have suffered enough.” Just no more surprise announcements, Petersen asked, “There’s a bank I’ve been meaning to knock over and I’ll need some time to plan. Even tho I won’t go to jail, I take a certain pride in doing the job right.”

A second criticism of the pardon highlighted the circumstances under which it had been issued. Many felt that Ford had acted too soon, before Nixon had even been indicted, and that the process had been too secretive. A lot of these writers expressed openness to a pardon had it
occurred later on down the road, but they rejected such a move as premature at this stage. Some also faulted Ford for not obtaining a statement where Nixon admitted guilt in return for his immunity from future prosecution. As the *New York Times* (1974b) lamented, “Now, by President Ford’s ill-considered action, the nation is in danger of losing even that note of clarity in a morass which has confused and divided a frustrated populace for two long years. Without the firm seal of a conclusive judgment by constitutional institutions, the way will be open wide for a subsequent demagogic rewriting of history that could poison the political atmosphere for generations to come.”

A third criticism maintained that the pardon was counterproductive. Ford wanted to put Watergate in the past by pardoning Nixon. Instead, these men and women objected, all he was doing was reopening old wounds. A piece by Childs (1974) was a good example of this strain of thought. Childs wrote, “It would be hard to imagine any better way to give new life to the whole Watergate horror than for President Ford to grant a precipitous blanket pardon to former President Nixon.” Childs blamed the pardon on Nixon holdovers in the Ford Administration and worried that if the pardon “is an example of that new man then we are in for trouble.”

Yet, it must be said that quite a few editorialists found Ford’s religious justifications for the pardon to be deeply offensive, too. Jack Mabley (1974) noted that the pardon speech “was virtually a religious production, with frequent references to ‘a humble servant of God’ and a decision reached ‘with the help of God.’” “Well, it was a lousy decision and I don’t think God had much to do with it,” Mabley added. Summing his feelings up, Mabley observed, “Religious faith is a very precious thing, and it is cheapened and endangered by this casual tossing around of
God’s name…” Likewise, scholar Martin Marty (1974) wrote in the Tribune that “whenever people invoke the gods for their political causes, all the stakes on both sides are raised and the danger of incivility increases.” He cited the Crusades and religious warfare in India and Israel as support for this contention. Though praising Ford for the sincerity of his beliefs, Marty still warned, “Americans will be better off if the religious community not only rejoices in its leaders’ faith but also joins all the biblical prophets in being instinctively suspicious of the pious claims of the powerful.”

Last, the pardon was not greeted by any better of a reception in Congress. Congress could not overturn the decision but they expressed their displeasure in a variety of other ways. First, there was some very vocal discussion about resuming the impeachment proceedings against Nixon which had been halted following his resignation, though Rep. Peter Rodino, Jr. (D-NJ), chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, indicated he had little interest in doing so. Nevertheless, Sen. Walter Mondale (D-MN) declared his intention to propose a constitutional amendment permitting Congress to overturn any future pardon by a two-thirds vote (Rich and Russell 1974). And ultimately, the Senate, by a vote of 55 to 24, did pass a resolution calling for Ford to refrain from pardoning any other Watergate defendants before those individuals had been tried. Congress also rebelled against Ford’s request for $850,000 to fund Nixon related expenses. Finally, the resolutions in the House that led to Ford’s appearance have been covered earlier. Congress’ response was so toxic that when congressional liaison William Timmons sent Haig a sampling of statements that Senators had made on the pardon, Haig asked that Ford not be allowed to see the document (Greene 1995, 55).
Remember Ford’s objective in pardoning Nixon was to move past Watergate. What this flurry of activity proves is that he actually renewed Congressional interest in re-fighting these past battles.

Ford was the kind of man who toasted his own English muffins and cleaned up after his dog. Ford was the kind of man who was unembarrassed to open his front door in his pajamas, in full-view of the press, and go get his morning paper. Ford was the kind of man who was candid enough to tell the country in his 1975 State of the Union Address that the state of the union was “not good.” Ford was the kind of man who could laugh when his wife pushed him, the President of the United States, clothes and all, into a pool at Camp David. He was a good, devout and sincere man. But the sincerity of his pleas for mercy was simply not enough. This case teaches us a valuable lesson- that being that religious rhetoric cannot save an unpopular idea poorly revealed.

Ford had turned to religious rhetoric as a way to finally temper the country’s obsession with Watergate. He could not govern until he did so. The pardon decision itself was a means to this end. But Ford wound up having the exact opposite effect of what he had intended. His public support was shattered, surveys showed that the country consistently opposed his handling of the issue, the media excoriated his performance, and Congress ultimately spent even more time on Watergate. His religious rhetoric was an unmitigated failure.

Ford felt that his inability to convince the country that the pardon was the right call was one of his biggest shortcomings as president. “I thought people would consider his resignation from the Presidency as sufficient punishment and shame. I thought there would be greater
forgiveness. It was one of the greatest disappointments of my Presidency that everyone focused on the individual instead of on the problems the nation faced” (Ford 1979, 178-179). For that, he has only himself to blame. Ford’s religious rhetoric was not only rejected, it was openly mocked. “All this Christian cant about forgiveness and mercy. Let ‘em release everybody in jail, just do away with the judicial system!” So said Bernice Myers of Takoma Park, with sarcasm, and apparently speaking for almost everyone when she did so (Kiernan and Bright-Sagnier 1974).
The “butterfly effect” is a metaphor meant to describe how one apparently meaningless event, a butterfly flapping its wings a continent away, can have major consequences later on in distant places. One such event is the arrival of twenty-one-year-old White House intern Monica S. Lewinsky in Washington in the summer of 1995. Lewinsky had obtained a position in chief of staff Leon Panetta’s office with the assistance of Walter Kaye, a millionaire insurance executive, a friend of Lewinsky’s mother and a major Democratic contributor. The intern and the President interacted several times that summer and fall, though never substantially.

In November of 1995 intense conflict between Clinton and the House Republicans over the budget forced a government shutdown. Lewinsky, by now a paid staffer in the Office of Legislative Affairs, was part of a skeletal crew of employees that came in to answer the phones and help out during the closure. On the 15th, the second day of the impasse, Clinton and Lewinsky flirted from a distance over the course of the work day. Early in the evening, Lewinsky walked by the door to the inner office of the West Wing and caught Clinton aimlessly standing alone. She quickly lifted the jacket of her pantsuit to reveal her thong underwear. As John Harris (2005, 223) amusingly puts it, “Somehow he interpreted this delicate signal as an invitation.”

Around 8PM, long after most of the other volunteers had called it a day, Clinton saw Lewinsky in the hallway and invited her into George Stephanopoulos’ office. The office was
connected via a back door to a hallway leading to Clinton’s study. There, the President asked the intern if he could kiss her. She said yes.

This was the start of a sixteen month affair, one finally ending in May 1997. The couple exchanged gifts and notes. They had furtive weekend liaisons, including one on Easter Sunday. They shared graphic telephone conversations. All in all, in the words of Clinton aide Rahm Emanuel, it was “less than sex but more than kissy-face” (Wilentz 2008, 382). Still, the transgressions would almost be enough to end Clinton’s presidency.

Clinton’s indiscretions were incomprehensible in many ways, not the least of which was that they occurred at the same time that he was fighting a sexual harassment suit that had been filed against him by Paula Jones in May 1994. Jones, a former Arkansas state employee, alleged that as Governor Clinton had unwelcomely propositioned her in a hotel room in Little Rock in 1991. Clinton’s lawyers argued that, as a civil matter, the resolution of the suit should have been postponed until after the completion of his time in office. The Supreme Court did not agree. In *Clinton v Jones* the Court unanimously held that the suit should be allowed to proceed. Jones’ lawyers then began to dig deep in Clinton’s past in order to see if they could unearth any other similar accusations. As Gil Davis, one of Jones’ counsels explained, “Showing a pattern or habit of sexual advances to women, particularly in private circumstances of some related nature, would be a method of showing that this was a characteristic of the president. So, yes, we were announcing that. Made no bones about it” (Gormley 2010, 241). Why Clinton was so incredibly reckless is hard to say. Clinton had admitted to causing “pain” in his marriage in the past, but had never been trapped by anything specific. On December 6, 1997, the Clinton legal team
learned that Jones’ attorneys planned to call Lewinsky as a witness. Trouble was clearly unavoidable this time.

The Jones camp had the details about Clinton’s affair fall unexpectedly into their laps. After being transferred to the Pentagon, Lewinsky had befriended an older woman, Linda Tripp, with whom she shared details of her relationship with the President. Tripp was a Republican partisan who harbored a strong personal dislike of the Clintons. On the advice of Lucianne Goldberg, herself a former White House secretary and Nixon ally, Tripp began to secretly record her conversations with Lewinsky. It was Goldberg who then shared those tapes with Jones’ attorneys. It was Goldberg and a handful of Jones lawyers who also helped funnel the information to the staff of independent prosecutor Kenneth Starr, whose own investigation into the Whitewater real estate development had hit a wall. Based on what he learned, Starr quickly realized that he had solid grounds for charging Clinton with suborning perjury and obstruction of justice. He soon received formal permission from Attorney General Janet Reno to expand his investigation to include charges related to the Jones v Clinton case. Clinton’s two long-running nuisances, the Paula Jones suit and Whitewater, had thus merged into one spectacular problem.

The President was deposed in the Jones case on Saturday, January 17, 1998 in his attorney’s offices, only two blocks from the White House. Clinton knew that the deposition, and its high degree of focus on Lewinsky, had not gone well. The specific nature of the questions—about gifts, about Lewinsky’s job search—revealed that some in the outside world knew what he had been doing behind closed doors and, on top of that, the President also recognized that his answers, though maybe not perjury by the technical definition, were not entirely truthful, either.
That same Saturday, after much debate, Newsweek ultimately decided not to publish a story on the affair by reporter Michael Isikoff. But the Drudge Report, a then fairly obscure gossip chasing website, did it for them, in a post that identified Lewinsky by name. On Tuesday evening, the Washington Post and ABC News simultaneously became the first mainstream outlets to cover the story. George Stephanopoulos, in his new role as an ABC News commentator, was one of the first to publicly discuss the possibility of impeachment. His coworker Sam Donaldson predicted a resignation, perhaps by the end of the week.

Clinton wavered on how he should respond. He turned to his former political guru Dick Morris, architect of Clinton’s strategy of “triangulation,” for advice. Morris himself was no stranger to sex scandals; he had been forced out of the White House after stories emerged prior to the 1996 election linking him to a prostitute. Morris surreptitiously took a poll with a small sample size. His results were discouraging to the President. Whereas people might forgive Clinton for his adultery, they would not be so forgiving when it came to perjury. 35% of respondents felt the President should go to jail if he lied. Morris summed up his findings: “They’re just too shocked by this. It’s just too new, it’s just too raw. They’re just not ready for it.” Clinton blusteringly replied, “Well, we just have to win then” (Harris 2005, 308).

For Clinton, “winning” literally meant “lying.” On January 26, at an appearance in the Roosevelt Room for his child care policy, Clinton issued his infamous, finger wagging denial: “But I want to say one thing to the American people. I want you to listen to me. I’m going to say this again. I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky. I never told anybody to lie, not a single time- never. These allegations are false. And I need to go back to work for the
American people” (Clinton 1998a).

Clinton’s combative posture worked to temporarily quiet the storm. He further helped his case by delivering a well-received State of the Union address shortly thereafter. Starr’s investigation continued, but over the next several months Clinton was mostly able to focus on the work of his Administration unimpeded.

That was no longer possible as the summer came to an end. Lewinsky negotiated an immunity deal with Starr’s office at the end of July, in the process turning over the evidence she had in her possession, including the rumored blue dress. Clinton had his blood drawn for DNA testing and agreed to a deposition with Starr’s team in the White House on August 17. With physical evidence in Starr’s possession, the stonewalling could not continue, not unless Clinton was determined to commit perjury.

In his deposition, Clinton read a prepared statement where he finally confessed to an inappropriate physical relationship with Lewinsky, though he defended his answers at the prior Jones deposition as accurate under the agreed to definition of sexual relations. That night, at 10 PM in the Map Room of the White House, Clinton addressed the nation (Clinton 1998b).

For a master politician with such finely tuned political antennae as Clinton, this speech was a shocking misstep. He was angry and defiant. In a very short statement (the total address was only 10 paragraphs long), Clinton chose instead to lash out at the right-wing conspirators rather than to apologize to the country. As he tried to explain why he had misled people about his relationship with Lewinsky, Clinton noted “The fact that these questions were being asked in a politically inspired lawsuit which has since been dismissed was a consideration, too.” He went
on to rip into Starr’s office, adding “I had real and serious concerns about an Independent Counsel investigation that began with private business dealings 20 years ago—dealings, I might add, about which an independent Federal agency found no evidence of any wrongdoing by me or my wife over two years ago. The Independent Counsel investigation moved on to my staff and friends, then into my private life. And now the investigation itself is under investigation. This has gone on too long, cost too much, and hurt too many innocent people.” Furthermore, Clinton essentially said that the affair was irrelevant and off-limits, anyways. “It’s nobody’s business but ours,” Clinton argued, “Even Presidents have private lives. It is time to stop the pursuit of personal destruction and the prying into private lives and get on with our national life. Our country has been distracted by this matter for too long.” Never once did Clinton utter the single word that many listening were longing to hear—“sorry.”

The problem was that Clinton could not bring himself to say what he did not feel. Clinton admitted to his intimates that he did not regret having lied. It was Clinton’s view that the lie saved his presidency. By giving people time to process the allegations, most had gradually come to accept that something untoward had happened between Clinton and Lewinsky. It should have been old news. And Clinton, like his wife, really did believe that a coterie of enemies lurked just outside the White House gates, plotting his downfall. Hence, after his testimony with Starr, Clinton was “in a shaking rage” (Harris 2005, 342). In her memoirs, Hillary described him as “deeply angry” after the questioning (Clinton 2003, 467). Clinton gathered his advisors in the White House solarium to work on his speech draft but the scene was absolute chaos. As one witness put it, “this was like halftime at an NFL game” (Gormley 2010, 552). Some Clintonites
urged the President to be repentant; others played into Clinton’s feelings of persecution and argued that he should go on the attack. In the end, Clinton looked to the First Lady. Hillary coldly replied, “It’s your speech, Bill. Say whatever you want” (Harris 2005, 344). Regrettably for Clinton, he did just that.

The first family departed for their summer vacation in Martha’s Vineyard the next morning. The scene was a painful one as Chelsea Clinton walked between her parents on the trek across the White House lawn, taking each of their hands. Clinton would spend most of his vacation alone in the guest room, working the phone, trying to assess the damage. There the magnitude of his troubles really sunk in.

Clinton’s standing with his own party was shaky at best, to say nothing of his problems with the Republicans. Neither of the Democratic congressional leaders- in the Senate, Tom Daschle, and in the House, Dick Gephardt- would accept Clinton’s phone calls (Gormley 2010, 556). Gephardt would raise the possibility of impeachment in a speech on August 25 (Gillon 2008, 236). Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), one of Clinton’s strongest supporters, was another Democrat furious about his August 17 speech. Feinstein publicly fumed, “I was present in the Roosevelt Room in January when the President categorically denied any sexual involvement with Monica Lewinsky. I believed him. His remarks last evening leave me with a deep sense of sadness in that my trust in his credibility has been badly shattered” (Berke 1998a).

With a midterm election upcoming, many of the rank and file felt that Clinton’s adultery had jeopardized not just his, but their own careers, as well. And many were emboldened to further distance themselves from the President following a speech Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-CT)
delivered on the Senate floor on September 3. Lieberman had been carefully wording his twenty-four minute denouncement for days. Reading calmly from his prepared text, Lieberman criticized Clinton for behavior that was “not just inappropriate,” Lieberman said, but “immoral.” The Senator worried that Clinton’s actions were harmful because they send “a message of what is acceptable behavior to the larger American family—particularly our children—which is as influential as the negative messages communicated by the entertainment culture.” Lieberman’s willingness to break ranks inspired others, such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York and Bob Kerrey of Nebraska, to break their own silences and follow Lieberman with their own denunciations from the chamber floor (Berke 1998b).

For Clinton’s staff, this dissension among Democrats was terribly concerning. One aide remembered, “The lesson from Watergate was—it wasn’t when the Democrats wanted Nixon to leave; it’s when [the Senate Republicans] told him ‘it’s time.’ So we always saw the Democrats as our biggest vulnerability” (Gormley 2010, 556). Drawing on these parallels, some compared Lieberman’s remarks to those delivered by James Buckley, a New York Senator who was the first conservative Republican to demand Nixon’s resignation. In early September, it appeared as if this doomsday scenario might indeed be once more close to fruition. Senator Kent Conrad (D-ND) at one point told the Clinton legal team, “You are about three days from having the senior Democrats come down and ask for the president’s resignation” (Harris 2005, 347).

A similar reaction was playing out at the same time within the White House itself. Clinton faced the possibility of an all-out staff revolt. White House aides Doug Sosnick and John Podesta had found that the women working within the Administration had grown
increasingly upset about the President’s conduct while he was away at the Vineyard. There was a very real chance that a high-profile feminist such as Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala or Secretary of State Madeleine Albright might quit in protest. The repercussions of such a move could be dramatic. Concurrently, aides both past and present were pouring out their conflicted souls to the press.

In one influential piece, Dee Dee Myers (1998), Clinton’s press secretary from 1993 to 1994, expressed her profound disappointment with her former boss in the pages of *Time* magazine. Myers wrote that Clinton’s August 17th address was “mostly downhill” after “Good evening.” The article reads as a lament to an admiration lost. Myers reflected on her time with Clinton, explaining how impressed she was by him, how smart he is, how energetic. But Clinton’s speech seemed to have shattered a lot of these impressions for Myers. She wrote, “Monday night he had the chance to rise above the anger and the evasiveness that have done so much damage to his presidency. He didn’t… I just wish he had done right by all the people who so willingly gave him their votes, their hopes, their labor and their love.”

The Myers piece stands as partial evidence that Clinton’s standing with the media was no better than his standing with his party and his staff. Soon after he admitted his relationship with Lewinsky, over 140 newspapers called for his resignation (Johnson 2001, 378). The media specifically demanded to know why Clinton was not being more contrite about his failures. At a press conference with Russian President Boris Yeltsin on September 2, a reporter asked Clinton, “You know, there have been some who have expressed disappointment that you didn’t offer a formal apology the other night when you spoke to the American people. Are you- do you feel
you need to offer an apology? And in retrospect now, with some distance, do you have any feeling that perhaps the tone of your speech was something that didn’t quite convey the feelings that you had, particularly your comments in regard to Mr. Starr?” Clinton refused to back down, answering, “I think the question of the tone of the speech and people’s reaction to it is really a function of- I can’t comment on that. I read it the other day again, and I thought it was clear… And I was commenting that it seemed to be something that most reasonable people would think had consumed a disproportionate amount of America’s time, money, and resources and attention…” (Clinton 1998d).

This was not going to be good enough for a rabid press. The consensus was voiced by the *New York Times* (1998a) in its staff editorial on September 9. The paper wrote, “Mr. Clinton faces a rapid erosion of support that imperils his Presidency. As an astute politician and adroit card player, Mr. Clinton must by now realize that his incomplete explanations about Ms. Lewinsky are a losing hand. If Mr. Clinton wants to regain some control over his political situation, he must change course decisively and quickly. The country demands a serious Presidential discussion about the Lewinsky case…”

Clinton did ultimately come to agree with this editorialist. He knew he was losing the backing of his fellow Democrats, the media and even his staff. His friends and allies did not have any qualms telling him these difficult truths (see McAuliffe 2007, 163). And for his part, Clinton agreed. In his memoirs, Clinton (2004, 803) owns up to his poor performance: “I believed every word I said, but my anger hadn’t worn off enough for me to be as contrite as I should have been.”
Most of the presidents in these pages faced policy crises. Their own jobs were not at stake. In that sense, Clinton was the most desperate of all, his job was at stake, and he ultimately responded by turning to religious rhetoric as a means for both saving his soul and his Administration.

Speaking the language of religion certainly did come easily to Clinton for he had sought comfort in his faith from a very young age. Clinton’s biological father had died in a traffic accident three months before Bill was born in 1946. Clinton’s mother, Virginia Kelley, had remarried to a divorcee named Roger Clinton in 1950 and moved her family with him to Hot Springs, Arkansas. Bill, originally given the last name Blythe, would ultimately adopt his stepfather’s name. Yet Clinton’s relationship with Roger was anything but smooth. Roger Clinton was a drinker and physically abusive. Once, Roger assaulted Virginia in full view of the crowd at a community dance. On another occasion, in the midst of a fight about visiting a sick relative, he fired a gun in her direction.

One can imagine how church could be Clinton’s means of escape from this turmoil. Every Sunday he would walk to the local Baptist church by himself, as neither his stepfather nor his mother were regular worshippers. Clinton was actively involved in the church’s community. It was no surprise when he was asked to be the prayer leader of his high school’s graduation ceremony. As a boy, Clinton was especially influenced by the sermons of Billy Graham and he secretly mailed a part of his allowance to the preacher as a donation.

Clinton combined his Southern Baptist traditions with the experiences he had with other Christian faiths throughout his life. He spent several years of elementary school being taught by
the nuns at St. John’s Catholic School. Financial pressures forced the family to soon place him back in the public school system, but the time spent at St. John’s left its mark on Clinton. Later, Clinton attended Georgetown University, a school run by the Catholic Jesuit order. In addition to the religious instruction he received from his classes, Clinton was known to attend Mass with his fellow Catholic students (Hamilton 2003, 132). During college, he also would frequently accompany his friend, Kit Ashby, to First Presbyterian Church (Espinosa 2009, 439). As a result, Clinton was well versed in the terms and beliefs of multiple Christian sects.

Even so, as president, Clinton regularly passed over opportunities to use religious rhetoric to his political advantage. Clinton’s typical rhetorical strategy instead tended to highlight the plight of the individuals he had met during the course of his travels. By re-telling their stories, Clinton obviously hoped to convert the sympathy their tales of woe produced into political support for his programs.

Healthcare is a fine example of this pattern. Religion would seem to be a natural fit here, what with the emphasis many faiths place on taking care of the sick. However, Clinton tacked in another direction. Audiences would hear him speak, for example, about Michael and Joanne Britt. Michael was a truck driver and Joanne was seriously ill. Their health insurance cost them so much, Clinton said, that they were forced to live in a trailer (Clinton 1994d). Or they would learn about a letter Clinton received from Jo Anne Osteen of Sumter, South Carolina. Osteen owned a small business and was responsible for raising three children. She struggled with diabetes and arthritis and, despite not having been hospitalized in twelve years, her insurance rates had gone up to $306 a month, even though she was only making $205 a week. Her doctors
told her to quit and go on disability (Clinton 1994a). Others would be told the story of Jeanette Windham of Shreveport, LA. Clinton met her at an airport one night. Windham had had a brain aneurism in the past. Her doctor gave her a clean bill of health but the company she worked for, which happened to be an insurer, still refused to provide her with coverage (Clinton 1994b). The general message of these stories was always that the country owed these people something more. As Clinton, speaking in particular about Pennsylvanian Louise Mastowski, once said, “You tell me how you can justify in the United States of America rationing health care to a dairy farmer like Louise. How can you justify rationing health care to a fine woman and her husband and their five children? We say this is a pro-family country. There’s a man, his wife, and five children; we have just rationed health care to them. No other advanced country in the world would cut them off without any health care. Only the United States does it. I think we can do better” (Clinton 1994c).

Clinton would take a similar approach when selling his crime package, often giving concrete examples of individuals who had suffered terribly from violence. Similarly, NAFTA was almost always framed in terms of actual companies who would benefit from freer trade. Religious rhetoric was typically nowhere to be found. The Lewinsky scandal is, in many ways, an exception to the rule.

In truth, Clinton actually began to turn to religious arguments at the very end of August, beginning with a speech he gave on the 28th in Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts (Clinton 1998c). The President was in town visiting a simple, one room, wooden chapel for the purpose of commemorating the 35th anniversary of the civil rights March on Washington. The original draft
of Clinton’s speech dealt solely with the issue of civil rights but the President sensed an opportunity to broaden its scope. Clinton drafted his remarks on the fly, writing them in part on his ride to the church and even while sitting backstage prior to ceremonies (Seelye 1998).

Clinton began by sharing his own memories of the speech—where he watched it (his family’s living room in Hot Springs), what he felt, what he thought. He then applied King’s message of interdependence and nonviolence to a variety of current problems, ranging from relations with Russia to the crime bill to terrorism. Where things really got interesting, though, is when Clinton began to discuss what he had learned about forgiveness from Dr. King and the marchers. Clinton went on,

All of you know, I’m having to become quite an expert in this business of asking for forgiveness. It gets a little easier the more you do it. And if you have a family, an administration, a Congress, and a whole country to ask, you’re going to get a lot of practice.

But I have to tell you that, in these last days, it has come home to me, again, something I first learned as President, but it wasn’t burned in my bones, and that is that in order to get it, you have to be willing to give it.

And all of us— the anger, the resentment, the bitterness, the desire for recrimination against people you believe have wronged you, they harden the heart and deaden the spirit and lead to self-inflicted wounds. And so it is important that we are able to forgive those we believe have wronged us, even as we ask for forgiveness from people we have wronged. And I heard that first—first—in the civil rights movement: “Love thy neighbor as thyself.”

Obvious religious references abound in this passage. For one, Clinton speaks of the importance of forgiveness, both in terms of seeking it and granting it. This is one of the most commonly broached subjects in the Bible; there are approximately 125 direct references to forgiveness in its pages (Ryken, Wilhoit and Longman III 1998, 302). Even those wholly
unfamiliar with religion could be expected to have some awareness of the New Testament image of a merciful and forgiving God.

In a more specific way, Clinton talks about forgiveness in the context of the Lord’s Prayer, playing upon it when he says, “As so it is important we are able to forgive those we believe have wronged us, even as we ask for forgiveness from people we have wronged.” The Lord’s Prayer, also called the Our Father or the Paternoster, is the central prayer of the Christian faith. Though its text and usage have varied across time and place, the prayer has a scriptural basis, found as it is in two different New Testament accounts of Jesus’ teachings (Lk 11: 2-4; Mt 6: 9-13). Clinton’s words sound very similar to lines of the prayer as it appears in each gospel. In Matthew, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (6: 12). And in Luke, “And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us” (11: 4).

What Jesus is saying in these gospels is fairly easy to grasp; it is that forgiveness of our own sins depends on our willingness to forgive the sins of others. He is quoted making this point explicit following the prayer’s appearance in Matthew: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Mt 6: 14-15).

Hence, the subtext of Clinton’s particular phrasing is that he now realizes that if he wants to be forgiven for his affair, he must first be willing to forgive Starr for his excesses. There was precious little of that in his speech on the 17th.

Two, Clinton uses the phrase “harden the heart.” He suggests that anger at one’s enemies hardens the heart. Many who would read these lines in their morning papers would recognize
the words. In addition to being the basis for many popular church hymnals, the admonition to
not harden one’s heart is found in several places in the Bible. For instance, in Hebrews 3: 15, the
Holy Spirit is quoted as warning, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts...”
The phrases are repeated at other places throughout Hebrews (i.e. 3: 7-8; 4: 7) and are found in
Psalm 95 (7-8) as well: “O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your
hearts...”

Finally, three, Clinton concludes with yet another Biblical quotation, “Love thy neighbor
as thyself.” This commandment can be found in the Old Testament (Lev 19: 18) as well as the
New. According to Christ, it is the second most important requirement of faith, trailing only
loving God with all that you have (see Mk 12: 28-34). We can surmise that given the context of
the quote- it appears in a section where Clinton is discussing his “desire for recrimination against
people you believe have wronged you”- Clinton is again intimating that he must be kinder to his
political opponents, including Starr. In a very profound way, Clinton used all these religious
references to renounce his earlier comments as a betrayal of his beliefs.

Clinton continued his steps towards penance in a private meeting with his cabinet at the
White House on September 10. Clinton told his secretaries that he realized now that he had
cheated on his wife out of anger. It was not anger at her, but at his opponents, which had made
him emotionally vulnerable and susceptible to self-destructive behavior. Clinton personally
apologized to his Administration and explained, with tears in his eyes, how he had now turned to
Scripture for strength in overcoming this ordeal. Some were sympathetic to what he was saying.
Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater and Labor Secretary Alexis Herman, for instance, spoke
up afterwards in Clinton’s defense, themselves pointing to the Bible’s message of forgiveness and redemption. Bruce Babbit, Secretary of the Interior and a practicing Catholic, spoke to Clinton about the therapeutic effects of confession. Others, however, were less convinced. Shalala and Albright, in particular, loudly expressed their disappointment and anger. For Shalala, moral leadership—something Clinton was failing to provide—was a key part of any president’s national responsibilities.

According to Clinton, it was at this cabinet meeting that the gravity of the scandal dawned on him. He remembers, “Listening to my cabinet, I really understood for the first time the extent to which the exposure of my misconduct and my dishonesty about it had opened a Pandora’s box of emotions in the American people” (Clinton 2004, 809). That night, Clinton did not sleep. He spent the late evening and early morning hours scribbling on a legal pad what he would say in an appearance the next morning at the annual White House prayer breakfast.

The prayer breakfast speech meets our criteria for being considered a major address since it was carried live by the networks. Clinton announced early in his remarks that this speech would be his confession, saying “I agree with those who have said that in my first statement after I testified, I was not contrite enough. I don’t think there is a fancy way to say that I have sinned. It is important to me that everybody who has been hurt know that the sorrow I feel is genuine: first and most important, my family; also my friends, my staff, my Cabinet, Monica Lewinsky and her family, and the American people. I have asked all for their forgiveness” (Clinton 1998e). The quote where Clinton called himself a sinner was a guaranteed sound bite, and a necessary one if people were to take this attempt at contrition seriously. It is still exceedingly rare, though,
to hear a president talk in terms of “sin” as opposed to “errors,” “mistakes,” or any other less spiritual identifier.

Clinton moved on to explain the changes he was prepared to make: “But I believe that to be forgiven, more than sorrow is required— at least two more things: first, genuine repentance, a determination to change and to repair breaches of my own making— I have repented; second, what my Bible calls a ‘broken spirit,’ an understanding that I must have God’s help to be the person that I want to be, a willingness to give the very forgiveness I seek, a renunciation of the pride and the anger which cloud judgment, lead people to excuse and compare and to blame and complain.” There are several notable religious aspects to this paragraph.

The phrase “broken spirit” appears to be a quotation taken from Psalm 51:17, which reads “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” If so, it was a very thoughtful and appropriate choice. Psalm 51 is a prayer for cleansing and pardon (Terrien 2003, 400-410). The Psalm likely was composed sometime in the sixth century BC and is meant to recall when David, the first king of Israel, had an affair with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah (see 2 Sam 11-12). David had spotted Bathsheba bathing from his roof. Struck by her beauty, he sent a messenger to procure the woman for him. But Bathsheba became pregnant and David had to have her husband killed in order to take her as his own wife. David’s actions upset God, who afflicted the child with a terrible sickness as punishment. David wept, prayed and fasted for a week, but still the child died. In the Psalm, the singer is begging for forgiveness for these sins, which are admitted to be attacks against God himself (“Against you, you alone, have I sinned”).
The particular words “broken spirit” are meant to capture the idea that the singer is abandoning his ego and ambition and thereby giving himself up entirely to God. Clinton, by choosing this to cite these lines, is at once expressing his profound remorse for his David-like adultery, while at the same announcing his commitment to changing his ways.

Additionally, “repair breaches” is a phrasing that would certainly register with the ministers in attendance, if not as much with the outside world, perhaps. The label “repairer of the breach” is a well known term found in Isaiah 58. Isaiah 58 is about the difference between false and true worship (Hanson 1995, 204-207). It is a polemic directed against a group that is pious and meticulous in religious practices, but hypocritical in their actions. They fast and bow their heads, but they still oppress their workers, act selfishly, quarrel and fight. If, however, the people abandon their selfishness, if they aid their fellow neighbors in need, the Lord will guide and protect them (“and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail”). Only then, they “shall be called repairer of the breach, restorer of streets to live in.” Many Christian groups and schools have been so inspired by this message that they have included it as part of their nomenclature.

By using the phrase “repair breaches,” Clinton could very well have been signaling that he knew that up until this point he, too, was pursuing his own interest at the expense of God’s. The President may have gone to church, he may have talked publicly about the importance of family values, but these things did not square with his private behavior. However, this phrasing was also a curious choice since, as many critics would point out, this whole speech- on TV, in front of a sympathetic audience, from a President who only adopted a confessional tone once his
Administration seemed at a point of maximum peril - could be accused of being an example of exactly the kind of false religion Isaiah decries.

A final important facet of this part of the address was that Clinton again picks up on the theology of the Lord’s Prayer, pointing once more to the importance of giving “the very forgiveness I seek.”

After thanking people for their support, and asking for their prayers, Clinton speculated whether or not this entire sordid episode might in the end have a silver lining:

Nevertheless, in this case, it may be a blessing, because I still sinned. And if my repentance is genuine and sustained, and if I can maintain both a broken spirit and a strong heart, then good can come of this for our country as well as for me and my family.

The children of this country can learn in a profound way that integrity is important and selfishness is wrong, but God can change us and make us strong at the broken places. I want to embody those lessons for the children of this country, for that little boy in Florida who came up to me and said that he wanted to grow up and be President and to be just like me. I want the parents of all the children in America to be able to say that to their children.

Needless to say, it is quite debatable whether the President cheating on his wife was a “blessing” and “good” for the children of the country. That being said, this was not the only occasion on which Clinton voiced these sentiments. At a press conference with Andres Pastrana of Colombia on October 28, Clinton spoke of how children might learn from him that if they make mistakes, they should be humble, trust in God, and he will help them grow stronger as a result (Clinton 1998i). Clinton told the reporters,

I was talking about- on the first question you asked, I think what people ought to say to their children is that when someone makes a mistake, they should admit it and try to rectify it and that this is an illustration of the fact
that those rules should apply to everyone, but that when people do that, if they do it properly, they can be stronger in their personal lives and their family lives and in their work lives.

And many of us in life can cite examples where if we went through a period of assessing, that we grew stronger from it, and we actually did better. With a humble spirit, with the grace of God, and with a lot of determination, I think that happens. And I think in that sense, the lesson is a good one, that it should apply to everyone, from the President on down.

One particularly unique aspect of Clinton’s very unique speech on the 11th was that the President’s rhetoric went beyond the typical Christian-centrism manifested by most presidents. In the last section of the speech, Clinton recited an extensive passage from the Yom Kippur liturgy in a Jewish prayer book called “Gates of Repentance.” The prayer asked for God’s assistance in helping the faithful to change their ways from “callousness to sensitivity, from hostility to love, from pettiness to purpose, from envy to contentment, from carelessness to discipline, from fear to faith.” The theme of the liturgy was about the time for “turning.” Turning for leaves, birds and animals, the prayer reads, comes instinctively. But the prayer makes note of the special difficulties humans face as they try to break old habits, admit wrong and start all over again.

In concluding, Clinton ended his speech with a moving and sentimental prayer of his own:

I ask you to share my prayer that God will search me and know my heart, try me and know my anxious thoughts, see if there is any hurtfulness in me, and lead me toward the life everlasting. I ask that God give me a clean heart, let me walk by faith and not sight.

I ask once again to be able to love my neighbor- all my neighbors- as myself; to be an instrument of God’s peace; to let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart and, in the end, the work of my hands, be
pleasing. This is what I wanted to say to you today.

Thank you. God bless you.

The ritual of confession is most commonly associated with Roman Catholicism. The Fourth Lateran Council, convened by Pope Innocent III in 1215, marked a change in practice as the Church began for the first time to emphasize the verbal act of confession rather than public penance. In canon 21, annual confession in private to a parish priest was made an obligation on all the community. It stands today as one of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church.

Typically termed penance or reconciliation, confession joins baptism, confirmation, receiving the Eucharist, anointing of the sick, holy orders and matrimony as one of the most important activities a Catholic is called to participate in.

Although not as formalized as the Catholic practice, confession still has an important role in the Protestant traditions as well. Part of the rationale for the Protestant Reformation was outrage over confessional abuses. Priests were in the practice of selling indulgences in return for the forgiveness of sins. These payments were bribes or blackmail, depending on how one looked at them. As a consequence, many Protestant churches have a history of skepticism when it comes to individual confession, instead preferring that all attendees perform a general confession during services. Similarly, in Judaism, the community as a whole confesses their sins, much of it in plural language, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (see Hymer 1995).

The point is that a great majority of Americans had some experience with what Clinton was doing on the 11th. They could relate, in a very personal way, to this political performance.

A few days later, a press conference that Clinton held with President Vaclav Havel of the
Czech Republic was hijacked with questions about Lewinsky (Clinton 1998f). Clinton mostly tried to stick to the foreign policy issues he had intended to discuss. Still, a few of his answers are significant for the reason that they provide strong evidence of his change in tone since August 17. His responses were remorseful, not defiant, and gave the impression of someone who was penitent and seeking the country’s forgiveness. Twice, Clinton lamented the “pain” he had caused and noted the “work” he was doing to heal it. “I’m trying to do the still quite painful work that I need to do with my family in our own life…” And, later, “Let me, first of all, say that the personal toll on me is of no concern except insofar as it affects my personal life. I think the- and I feel the pain better now because I’m working on what I should be working on.”

Clinton also used a word with strong religious connotations when, at another point, he spoke of his intent to “atone” for his behavior: “On last Friday at the prayer breakfast, I laid out as carefully and as brutally honestly as I could what I believe the essential truth to be. I also said then, and I will say again, that I think that the right thing for our country and the right thing for all people concerned is not to get mired in all the details here but to focus- for me to focus on what I did, to acknowledge it, to atone for it; and then to work on my family, where I still have a lot of work to do, difficult work; and to lead this country…”

The choice of words like “atone” is key because, like the use of the term “sin” before, these words carry more weight than other, less religious synonyms such as “apologize” and the like. In fact, Clinton repeatedly opted for these religious words over other available alternatives throughout the impeachment process. For example, in his remarks to the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation on September 19, Clinton began by saying to his supporters, “I have a speech
I want to give, but first I’d like to say something from the heart. I want to thank you for standing up for America with me. I want to thank you for standing up for me and understanding the true meaning of repentance and atonement” (Clinton 1998g). Similarly, Clinton would make a statement much like the one above at the press conference with Andres Pastrana at the end of October: “I hope the American people have seen in me over these last few weeks a real commitment to doing what I told them I would do from the beginning, to try to atone to them for what happened and to try to redouble my efforts to be a good President” (Clinton 1998i).

The final element of Clinton’s religious rhetorical strategy in this case was the expression of some rather fatalistic impulses. One of the ways Clinton justified ignoring the ongoing controversy in favor of other presidential business was that the whole matter was out of his hands and, ultimately, one for God to adjudicate. This line of argument was forcefully advanced in his brief remarks to reporters following the vote on impeachment on October 8 (Clinton 1998h). Clinton told the press, “First of all, I hope that we can now move forward with this process in a way that is fair, that is constitutional, and that is timely. The American people have been through a lot on this, and I think that everyone deserves that. Beyond that, I have nothing to say. It is not in my hands; it is in the hands of Congress and the people of this country, ultimately in the hands of God. There is nothing I can do.” Clinton returned to this theme at the end of the availability, answering a follow-up question by claiming, “Personally, I am fine. I have surrendered this. This is beyond my control. I have to work on what I can do.”

In the end, Clinton mostly avoided discussing the prospect of impeachment. Between his August 17, 1998 speech and February 19, 1999, a week after his ultimate acquittal by the Senate,
Clinton mentioned impeachment on only twenty-eight occasions. Moreover, fourteen of the twenty-eight were brief statements where Clinton addressed the issue by saying he would not be addressing the issue, i.e., on October 9: “I don’t have anything to add to what I said yesterday” (Hart and Sawyer 2003, 198). Thus, the rhetoric that has been analyzed above represents a very healthy percentage of all President Clinton was ever to say about Monica Lewinsky.

It appears safe to claim that Clinton’s religious rhetoric was a strategic choice made at a crucial point in his presidency. Clinton turned to religion only after his previous attempts at short-circuiting the controversy had failed, alienating the media, his fellow Democrats and even his own staff in the process. Quite simply, he was responding to demands for contrition by being more contrite. Clinton confessed his “sin” before a group of ministers, he directly quoted religious texts from multiple faiths on several occasions and he regularly elected to use meaningful religious words like “atone” and “repentance” instead of other secular alternatives.

It would seem that Clinton’s religious pivot was successful. After all, he did manage to avoid being removed from office. However, a closer look at the evidence reveals a much more complicated picture.

Public opinion must be a major part of any discussion of Clinton’s impeachment. In truth, Clinton’s high marks were one of the main reasons the Republicans were not able to attract the votes needed to remove him from office. Monica had almost zero effect on evaluations of Clinton’s performance throughout the entire thirteen months of the scandal. Chart 11.1 shows the extraordinary stability of Clinton’s approval ratings.

On January 28, 1998, two days after Clinton’s first forceful public denial, the President
received the support of 67% of Americans in the Gallup Poll. By February 19, 1999, one week after his acquittal, Clinton was still clocking in at 66%. Never at any point between these dates did the President fall below 60%. Never at any point did he rise above 73%. Ironically, Clinton’s high was reached on the very day, December 19, that the House voted for two articles of impeachment.

What these findings also must mean is that Clinton’s religious rhetoric did not have much, if any, impact on his standing. He was in good position to begin with and his shift to religious language in late August did not change this, one way or the other. A variable (his type of rhetorical defense) cannot explain a constant (his high ratings). Clinton received only a 3% bump from his major speech to the prayer breakfast on September 11. His approval was 60% on the 10th and improved to 63% by the twelfth. This increase is too small to be sure that the movement was statistically significant and his ratings for that week did not move any further.
upward; his approval was measured at 64% on the 13th and 63% on the 14th (Ragsdale 2009, 246).

A glance at the more specific polling displayed in Chart 11.2 muddles, but perhaps does not change, this first impression.

ABC News tracked whether Americans felt Clinton should remain in office or resign due to his personal misconduct. His support was high on this issue, as well. At no point did a majority of Americans favor his resignation. However, there is a clear trend visible in this graph. The gap between those who wanted Clinton to continue as president and those who preferred that he step aside visibly narrowed in the middle of September. The explanation for this development
is probably the fall-out from the graphic and gratuitous Starr report, a document that boldly detailed the President’s sexual dalliances. The Starr report was released to the public on the afternoon of September 11.

There are two ways one could interpret this data with respect to the effects of Clinton’s religious rhetoric. On the one hand, one could argue that his religious rhetoric helped him climb back to his original position. By the end of the time series, there is again a difference of around 30% in the percentages of those saying they wished him to remain in office versus those saying they wanted him to resign. On the other hand, however, one could argue that his religious rhetoric did little to arrest the damaging consequences of the Starr report’s release. A poll taken on the afternoon of September 11, after Clinton’s speech to the ministers, was the closest in the set; 50% of respondents supported him, 45% of respondents wanted his resignation.

In truth, the opinion data is even more confounding when one considers that the public was at the same time entirely convinced of Clinton’s guilt. In a December 1998 poll, for example, 80% of Americans answered yes to the question, “Just your best guess- do you think Clinton did or did not lie under oath about having an affair with Lewinsky?” (ABC News/Washington Post 1998). Reflecting this evaluation, Clinton was seen as a man of integrity by fewer people than Richard Nixon was just two weeks before Nixon finally resigned (Renshon 2002b, 422). What could possibly account for these massive contradictions?

Renshon (2002a; 2002b) examines no less than fifteen potential explanations, including the idea that the public, having earlier been exposed to Gennifer Flowers and the history of Clinton’s draft-era evasions, had already come to terms with Clinton’s lapses in morality; the
possibility that Americans were experiencing a backlash against an attack culture; and the
ambivalence the country displays when it comes to the private lives of their politicians, among
others. Most of these theories are somewhat flawed or unsatisfactory to Renshon. Zaller (1998),
in contrast, draws a relatively simple lesson from the public’s (non)reaction to Monica- that
being that politics are driven primarily by substance. Voters do not care about the sex lives of
their politicians, Zaller argues, so much as they do about peace, prosperity and moderation- all of
which stood in Clinton’s favor. Sonner and Wilcox (1999) agree with Zaller but also point to the
effects of Clinton’s striking political skills, especially when contrasted with the dislikable nature
of all the other players involved in the scandal. Bennett (2002) makes a different point
altogether. He claims that the public did not care about the scandal because they were not even
paying attention to it in the first place. His data shows Americans ranking the story as less
important than other concurrent events like Columbine and the death of John F. Kennedy Jr.
Only 1/3 of individuals reported following the Lewinsky scandal very closely.

Thus, no academic consensus yet exists to explain the resiliency of Clinton’s popularity.
Perhaps Clinton’s religious rhetoric helped with the public. But a more likely conclusion is that
none of this- whether Clinton’s arguments or the very scandal itself- left much of an impression
on the country. In the end, we can certainly be sure that larger forces were at work here beyond
simply the persuasive power of religion.

In contrast to the apparent stability of public opinion during the scandal, Clinton’s
religious rhetoric on impeachment produced a solidly negative response from the editorialists of
the four papers. Table 11.1 displays the results. Of the 55 editorials published in the week after
Clinton’s prayer breakfast speech, 32 were negative in tone (58.2%). Moreover, the average score was 2.22, a mark falling well into negative territory.

Clinton’s overt religiosity at the breakfast led to an avalanche of scorn. Many writers were skeptical, if not outright offended, by Clinton’s rhetorical strategy. For the *New York Times* (1998b), the most important characteristic of Clinton’s speech was not the words he chose but rather its poor timing: “He (Clinton) attempted to repair the damage yesterday at the White House prayer breakfast with his most aggressive speech of contrition. With its unmitigated confession, its declaration of repentance, its forthright apology to Ms. Lewinsky, this was a striking speech. But its most striking feature was its lateness. The same words delivered in January, when he lied, or on Aug. 17, when he equivocated and hurled blame, might have lifted Mr. Clinton on to a road of guaranteed survival. He has no such guarantee today.”

Hiatt (1998), in turn, took issue with one specific point of Clinton’s— the President’s claim that his affair might wind up being a blessing for the country. Hiatt ripped Clinton for “the brazenness with which he invites us all to join in his healing” and he asked the president to have the “decency” to not make the country “endure further lectures on how it had all been to the good- our good.” Hiatt was skeptical of most of Clinton’s speech, actually, admitting that, to him, how the ministers in attendance “could be so certain of the president’s sincerity was hard to fathom.”

Indeed, the sincerity of Clinton’s religious appeals, or lack thereof, was another point of objection raised by many writers. Safire (1998) wrote that “the central fact making a mockery of his misty-eyed ‘repentance’ is this: He refuses to admit, even now, that he and Monica Lewinsky
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had a sexual relationship.” Haberman (1998) sounded a similar note. Derisively calling Clinton “The First Supplicant,” Haberman argued that Clinton simply had not done enough to atone for his conduct. He observed, “the President would have been well warned that here, as elsewhere, contrition has its limits. Apologies do not absolve all sins, even when they are offered right away and with apparent feeling, not on the installment plan that Mr. Clinton has preferred.” For Haberman, “statements of contrition from one who has seriously sinned should carry only so much weight.”

Kass (1998) was incensed by the legal defense that was also embedded in Clinton’s speech. For this author, such statements served to undermine the rest of the message. Kass argued, “While making public contrition, he ordered his lawyers and mouthpieces to attack and confuse and spin. The idea is to shape public opinion. These aren’t the actions of a contrite sinner seeking redemption. They are the tactics of a desperate man who would damage his nation to win a political fight.” Kass concluded his column with four words of advice for Clinton: “Spare us. Get out.”

Even the reliable liberal Maureen Dowd (1998) was not buying Clinton’s confession. Dowd mocked Clinton’s penchant for treating language as subjective, for disputing what words such as “is” and “alone” really mean. Quoting Orwell, Dowd wrote that “the great enemy of clear language is insincerity.” Along those lines, she simply could not believe what Clinton had said at the prayer breakfast: “Mr. Clinton’s supporters are upset that he did not give his groveling prayer breakfast speech 25 days earlier, on the night he made his defiant television address. But the petulant and angry TV address was the authentic Clinton moment. The repentant and lip-
biting prayer breakfast speech was the contrived Clinton moment. We no longer expect this President to be sincere. We just expect him to fake better, fake sooner.”

There were precious few commentators rushing to Clinton’s defense. Only 7 positive editorials were printed in the week following Clinton’s apology. Those pieces that received positive scores mainly did so not because they praised Clinton— not a single piece even hazarded to compliment his prayer breakfast speech— but rather because they chose to strike at other targets instead. For instance, Charles Madigan (1998) focused on the 30% of the public, Clinton’s “enemies,” who would oppose him no matter what he did. Shawn Hubler (1998) blamed the American people for the mess instead. “Why, with all these facts, are we so disingenuous when it comes to human behavior? If we care so much about adultery, why didn’t we insist on a classier guy?” Hubler asked. Roiphe (1998) took aim at Lewinsky, depicting her as manipulative and conniving and painting Clinton as a victim of sorts. She concluded, “Whatever one thinks of Mr. Clinton or Monica Lewinsky, it is clear that the currents of exploitation, as they so often do, ran in both directions. And looked at in purely personal terms, the phrase ‘abuse of power’ could apply equally to the President and the former White House intern.”

The most popular place to shift blame, however, was clearly towards Ken Starr. In the most incendiary piece of all, Mary Schmich (1998) called the Starr report “a kind of collective rape— of the president, of Monica Lewinsky, of their families.” To her, Starr was a “vindictive Peeping Tom.” She openly asked whether members of Congress were “harrumphing because they’re jealous” or because “a failure to harrumph will suggest that they, too, are guilty of similar infractions” (for similar reactions, see Lewis 1998; Patterson 1998).
Still, though many writers were undeniably uncomfortable with the explicit content of the Starr report, more were mad at Clinton for providing the fodder for it in the first place. The New York Times (1998c) likely spoke for the majority this week when they claimed, “The most pressing issue before the nation is not the propriety of Mr. Starr’s descriptions of hallway sex in the White House, but the propriety of the President’s behavior and his respect for the laws governing sworn testimony.”

Overall, then, Clinton’s religious rhetoric did not seem to help his case with the media. In fact, given the large amount of criticism his language produced, his religious rhetoric may, as in other cases in this dissertation, actually have made things worse.

Finally, Clinton appears to have had mixed success in persuading Congress that the punishment for his affair was a matter between him and God instead of between him and the government. After the Republicans surprisingly lost seats in the midterm elections, they nonetheless decided to continue to pursue impeachment. Apparently the party leaders decided that they had already paid the price and, regardless, they were too far in at this point to back down. As Rep. Henry Hyde, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, told his fellow committee members, “What can we do? Can we sweep it under the rug?” (Wilentz 2008, 397). Still, as fall turned to winter, the proceedings became anti-climatic. There was little question by now that the votes for removing Clinton simply were not there.

On Saturday, December 19, the House voted on four articles of impeachment. The record is not positive for Clinton. He lost two of the four impeachment votes, on Article I (grand jury perjury) and Article III (obstruction of justice), meaning he would go to trial in the Senate.
These were embarrassing defeats. The votes for all four articles were exceptionally close: 228-206, 205-229, 221-212 and 148-285, in order.

At the same time, another key vote was the House’s vote to release the Starr report to the public. Clinton was livid about this particular vote and he rants against the injustice of it in his memoirs (see Clinton 2004, 809). Clinton lost this vote by a huge margin, though, 363-63.

Following the House’s actions, the Senate trial of President Clinton formally opened on January 7, 1999. After several weeks of testimony, the Senate began deliberating behind closed doors on February 9. On February 12, the Senate acquitted the president on both articles of impeachment, coming up well short of the two-thirds majority needed for conviction. The perjury charge was rejected 45-55, the obstruction charge 50-50. We should also take note of one of other specific vote. On January 27, Robert Byrd (D-WV), made a motion to dismiss the impeachment proceedings altogether. The motion was rejected, 44-56. It was a vote that could have saved Clinton much greater humiliation.

In sum, most importantly, Clinton’s religious rhetoric did not spare him the indignity of an impeachment trial. And other votes that could have greatly improved his situation, the vote against the release of the Starr report and for the Byrd dismissal motion, went decisively against him.

It is impossible to know whether what some were calling Clinton’s “contrition campaign” was a sincere attempt at personal atonement or not. Ironically, “I have sinned” seems to have entered the hall of classic Clintonisms, along with the definition of is, smoking but not inhaling and “I did not have sex with that woman.” “I have sinned” became in a way a defining quote for
the Clinton presidency. Whether Clinton truly felt this way or not, however, is somewhat immaterial. What we do know is it appears that Clinton only turned to religious rhetoric in desperation, as a strategic maneuver after his earlier comments on the affair, namely his speech on August 17, had fallen flat. And we do seem to know that this religious rhetoric did not improve his chances of survival. Public opinion was stable, whether Clinton was defiant or penitent. Clinton’s ratings showed no change after he embraced religious rhetoric, he received only a 3% boost from his major address on September 11 and more people wanted him to resign right after that speech than at any other time. The media was hostile, choosing to hammer away, in particular, at Clinton’s confessional language at the prayer breakfast on September 11. Many loudly questioned the President’s sincerity. Last, in Congress, Clinton could not avoid a series of disappointing and embarrassing defeats on several impeachment votes, including votes on related issues like the release of the Starr report in the House and the motion to dismiss the proceedings in the Senate. Despite the obvious unpopularity of the impeachment proceedings, Clinton’s religious rhetoric did nothing to stop them. So, sincere or not, as a strategic choice, Clinton’s instrumental use of religious rhetoric was a dubious choice, at best.

In the long run, the ultimate effects of the scandal on Clinton’s presidency should not be minimized. Clinton did not have a single major domestic accomplishment in the two years following his trial as both parties remained bitter over the proceedings. Clinton’s vice-president, Al Gore, actively tried to distance himself from his predecessor during the 2000 campaign and Clinton’s legacy may very well have sunk Gore’s candidacy. Election night exit polls showed that most voters approved of Clinton’s job performance but held negative feelings about him as a
person. As a result, Gore captured only 63% of the votes from those individuals who were happy with the job Clinton had done— a much smaller number than one would normally expect (Norpoth 2001, 48). Most importantly of all, Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky permanently tarnished what otherwise was a fairly successful term in office. No amount of religious speechifying could undo that damage.
Chapter 12

An Experimental Evaluation of Instrumental Religious Rhetoric

The previous eight case study chapters have all contributed the same basic insight: instrumental religious rhetoric is of limited value for a president who is trying to achieve his goals. Time and time again we have seen such language be rejected by public opinion, be eviscerated by critics in the media and be ignored by members of the U.S. Congress. What we still do not know, however, is why? Why has instrumental religious rhetoric failed? Is it because this kind of speech is simply not persuasive? Or, on the other hand, does it have something to do with context in which such rhetoric has appeared? In each case study, a president has only embraced religious arguments when in crisis. Clinton is staring down impeachment, so he says he has sinned. Carter’s approval rating falls, he trails Ted Kennedy for the Democratic nomination and his previous four energy addresses have all failed, so he begins to publicly discuss the meaning of life. George H.W. Bush sees support for his Gulf policy disintegrate at a key strategic moment, so he starts to frame the conflict as test of good and evil. It therefore remains possible that if only a president were to use instrumental religious rhetoric in more favorable circumstances, then perhaps he would witness a more favorable outcome as well.

The experiment that follows is designed to adjudicate between these two, competing explanations. The evidence suggests it is more likely that the former is correct than it is the latter.

Indeed, the experimental results will offer the following conclusions. First, exposure to a religious policy argument has no effect on an individual’s opinion. Second, exposure to secular
rhetoric is slightly more impactful than exposure to religious rhetoric. Secular rhetoric is further shown to be widely considered as a stronger type of argument. Finally, third, ideology and partisan affiliation are far more important than exposure to either type of rhetoric when it comes to explaining policy opinions, as one might reasonably expect to begin with.

**Experimental Design**

253 individuals participated in this experiment over the course of the fall of 2011. The study’s population was composed of both Columbia University and Barnard College undergraduates. The research design was approved by the institutional review board of Columbia University (protocol IRB-AAA15503). Students were invited to participate in the study during a regularly scheduled meeting of one of three political science lecture classes at Columbia, an introductory course in American politics, an introductory course in comparative politics and an upper level course on the role of labor in American politics. Despite the setting, participation remained optional and no compensation or extra credit was offered in exchange. For sure there are legitimate reasons to question any study using student subjects and I return to address these potential complications in the conclusion of the chapter.

Those students who did ultimately choose to participate received one of three different versions of a questionnaire that was distributed throughout each class at random. Those receiving questionnaires marked #1 read a series of consecutive policy speeches that each included examples of strong religious rhetoric. Participants were only told that they were about to read a “selection of 5 speeches made by past U.S. presidents, some Republicans and some Democrats.” Crucially, these sample speeches were designed to mimic the way instrumental
religious rhetoric has been used in practice by American presidents. The topics of the speeches are the same issues where presidents have historically made religious arguments. The corresponding themes of the speeches are the same themes that presidents have actually employed.

The first speech made the case for the importance of fully funding America’s foreign aid programs. The religious rhetoric in this treatment was an amalgam of points made at different times by a number of different presidents. The major source of this material, however, was Eisenhower. The speech principally highlights the importance of brotherhood, which in chapter four was shown to be a key Eisenhower motif. Further, the speech includes references to the special role God has assigned to America, an important part of George W. Bush’s (and Reagan’s, Truman’s and others’) rhetoric. Finally, the speech also makes reference to the Sermon on the Mount, a passage of Scripture that several presidents, namely Ford and George H.W. Bush, have drawn from in support of their policies.

The second speech was an argument about the need for additional civil rights legislation. This speech was constructed to reflect the type of religious arguments both Kennedy and Johnson had chosen to utilize. For example, the treatment references the Golden Rule and the possibility of an unfavorable eternal judgment if the country fails to live up to its obligations. There is plenty of evidence found in chapter nine that Johnson repeatedly expressed precisely these ideas. I do use a broader definition of civil rights in the speech, one that includes gender, sexual orientation and national origin, to reflect the fact that the meaning of the term has become more encompassing over time.
The third religious speech contained an argument for stronger environmental standards. This speech was wholly based on Carter’s rhetoric, rhetoric that was explored in depth in chapter five. The first paragraph includes arguments about stewardship and protecting what God has given to America. We have seen that these points marked Carter’s rhetoric during his steamboat tour. The second paragraph is meant to capture the jeremiad style of Carter’s malaise speech.

The fourth speech consists of a president defending himself after having admitted to an extramarital affair. This rhetorical treatment echoed Clinton’s religious rhetoric, in particular his comments from August 28, 1998 and his major speech at the national prayer breakfast on September 11, 1998. This instrumental usage of religious rhetoric was discussed in chapter eleven.

Finally, the fifth and final speech was a religion-based argument for government provision of healthcare. This issue has historically not been one on which presidents have used religious rhetoric but it easily could have been given the high priority many faiths place on taking care of the sick. It would be interesting to know if Truman or Clinton or even Barack Obama would have had more success had they offered a strong religious rationale for their healthcare programs. This last speech is meant to explore this hypothetical. I crafted the religious argument in these paragraphs by means of my own reading of documents produced during the recent healthcare debates by various religious organizations like Faith for Health that had mobilized to support reform.

Hence, as one easily can see, these speeches are not just religious arguments that presidents might use, they are the religious arguments that presidents have already used.
After reading a speech, a participant would be presented with a set of three questions. First, they would be asked about their opinion on the policy content of the speech they had just read. For instance, after reading a religious argument by an adulterous president begging for forgiveness, participants were asked whether any president who admits to an affair should resign from office. Next, participants were asked the following: “On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very weak and 5 being very strong, how strong an argument do you feel the president is making?” Finally, participants were asked: “Do you think this president was a Republican or a Democrat?”

The second section of the questionnaire consisted of a series of demographic queries. Students were surveyed on their sex, their race, whether they grew up in the South or not, their ideology, their partisanship, their political interest and their political knowledge. Participants were also asked a set of questions about their religious beliefs and practices, including what denomination they identify with, how often they go to church and whether they believe in God and the Bible or not. The wording of almost all of these questions, including the policy questions that follow the speeches, was taken verbatim from questions previously asked by either the General Social Survey or the National Election Studies. This approach ensures that the questions have been pre-tested and have a high degree of validity. The political knowledge questions were chosen based on the five point scale recommended by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993, 1996).

A second group of students received questionnaire #2. Questionnaire #2’s structure was almost identical to that of questionnaire #1- a series of five speeches on foreign aid, civil rights, the environment, an affair and healthcare, each followed by the same three questions, and then a
final section of the same demographic and religious measures. The major difference between the two versions is that in questionnaire #2 the speeches offered secular, rather than religious, arguments. The secular arguments were constructed on the basis of research into the kinds of claims different individuals and organizations supporting such policies most commonly make. For example, the civil rights secular speech is drawn in large part from a review of the ACLU’s platform. The secular speech for foreign aid is in large part drawn from an analysis of different articles in magazines like *Foreign Affairs*.

Thus, each religious speech in questionnaire #1 has a matching secular speech in questionnaire #2. The pairs are each more or less identical in terms of word count and each pair contains the same number of lines of text, thereby controlling for any potential length effects. All of the ten speeches range from roughly 240-280 words, a length meant to approximate a “whistle stop” type of address. Both the religious and the secular speech on an issue use the same introduction and the same conclusion. It is only the argument in the body of the text that provides the variation. Table 12.1 provides an illustration of the interrelationship between the two questionnaires as well as examples of the religious and secular treatments.

A final group received questionnaire #3. These students were not exposed to any speeches. Instead, this group was merely asked the policy, demographic and religious background questions. Questionnaire #3 is therefore a control group that will allow me to estimate what the impact of reading a speech is on an individual’s opinion. If religious rhetoric is indeed meaningful, the expectation would be that those exposed to a religious speech will report higher support for that policy than those who did not read a speech. By including tests of
I’d like to quickly talk to you today about the energy bill that’s currently being debated in Congress. You may have heard about it. It will require some sacrifice, whether in the form of slightly increased prices or the reductions in consumption each of us will have to make. But there’s a lot of misconceptions out there which I’d like to clear up. The simple truth is that we have to do a better job conserving and protecting our environment.

Sometimes I worry that we lose track of how many blessings have been bestowed upon this country. God has given us an abundant and fertile land, plentiful natural resources, great rivers, clean air. These are all gifts from God. Where would we be without them? I simply believe that it is incompatible with what the Bible teaches to waste what He has given to us. The time has come for us to recognize that there are limits and that we don’t have the right to squander our natural resources. We have to be good stewards of the environment.

Too often, though, I feel people are selfish and short-sighted. Too many of us now worship materialism and consumption and self-indulgence. We need to solve this energy problem together. Let’s search our own lives and hearts and ask what we can do to make them better, purer and more meaningful.

OR Secular Argument

We have to sacrifice because the planet is warming and if we don’t rein in our energy usage the consequences will be catastrophic. If current trends continue, increases in ozone will exacerbate breathing problems, causing additional serious respiratory illnesses and hospitalizations. As ice sheets melt, rising oceans will flood coastal areas around the globe. We have all unfortunately seen the devastating impact severe weather can have on our communities. But if we fail to act, in the future our coasts will be more frequently threatened by storms and hurricanes that are likely to become stronger.

Additionally, as all this happens, a number of species will be dislocated and some, such as polar bears, may be threatened with eventual extinction if ice continues to disappear. That is a tragic loss we could never replace.

We must adopt a new, comprehensive energy policy. We owe it to our children. Please call your Representatives and your Senators and ask them to support the energy bill.

Thanks, and have a great afternoon.

Matching Opinion Question

Some people think that current regulations to protect the environment are already too much of a burden on business. Suppose these people are at one end of scale, at point 1. Others think we need much tougher government regulations on business in order to protect the environment. Suppose these people are at the other end of the scale, at point 5. And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between.

Where would you place yourself on this scale?
secular rhetoric, we will also be able to determine if there is anything at all distinctive about religious language relative to other types of argumentation. If religious rhetoric is indeed meaningful, it should produce a greater increase in opinion than secular rhetoric.

81 students completed questionnaire #1, 85 students completed questionnaire #2 and 87 students completed questionnaire #3. Table 12.2 displays the summary statistics for each of these groups. Clearly, the three prove to be very similar.

Table 12.2: Selected Summary Statistics on Three Questionnaires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Questionnaire #1 Religious Speeches (N = 81)</th>
<th>Questionnaire #2 Secular Speeches (N = 85)</th>
<th>Questionnaire #3 Control (N = 87)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Female</td>
<td>51.85%</td>
<td>56.47%</td>
<td>59.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Southern</td>
<td>17.28%</td>
<td>23.53%</td>
<td>11.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Caucasian</td>
<td>58.44%</td>
<td>56.47%</td>
<td>52.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Ideology</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Partisanship</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pol. Knowledge</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>4.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Church Attend</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. Belief in God</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The design of this experiment has much in common with the growing body research that has tried to identify and untangle the various influences of political communication. From that collection of work, we can gather that a presidential speech could potentially impact opinion in two somewhat dissimilar ways (Nelson and Oxley 1999). For one, it has been argued that political communications have the ability to produce a fundamental change in a person’s underlying beliefs. A person could have been legitimately convinced by a George W. Bush speech that the PATRIOT Act was truly necessary to protect the country. This type of effect
resembles what most would traditionally call persuasion.

However, it has also been argued that political communications can more subtly influence an individual through framing. A frame, Gamson and Modigliani (1987, 143) tell us, is “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue.” Many scholars believe that frames can succeed merely by “selectively enhancing the psychological importance, relevance, or weight accorded to specific beliefs with respect to the issue at hand” (Nelson and Oxley 1999, 1043). When a speaker chooses to describe an event in certain way, he or she can cause individuals to focus on a certain subset of personal considerations when forming their own opinions. In this model, frames work because they lead individuals to prioritize specific values over others when determining how they feel about an issue, i.e. placing more weight on their concerns about security than they do on their concerns about liberty when they are asked about the PATRIOT Act.

An important debate exists, however, between those who maintain that individuals consciously evaluate the importance of different considerations and those who believe that the sampling of considerations is instead more or less a passive process. Nelson and his collaborators have provided much support for the former interpretation, but not all agree. Zaller (1992), for one, argues that most people are not sure about their opinions on the issues because they are rarely asked about them. So, when they are asked, people have to make it up as they go and thus are apt to be heavily influenced simply by whatever happens to be at the top of their minds at that very moment. This is why, Zaller says, people are more likely blame the poor for...
poverty (as opposed to society) if they have just watched a news story on a specific individual’s plight. The decisions of that individual are what is salient to them at the time (78).

Regardless of who is right or wrong, suffice it to say that a litany of studies have documented significant framing effects (for a comprehensive review, see Chong and Druckman 2007). To cite a few examples, Nelson, Clawson and Oxley (1997) show that if a rally of the Klan is framed as a free speech issue instead of a disruption of public order, respondents will express more toleration for the demonstration. Jacoby (2000) shows that when Democrats succeed in framing public spending as a benefit to a specific group, support for higher spending increases. Nicholson and Howard (2003) offer strong evidence that different frames providing different rationales for the Court’s decision in *Bush vs. Gore* yield different levels of support for the institution itself (i.e. framing the decision as deciding the election substantially diminishes the Court’s legitimacy).

Essentially, then, presidential rhetoric could impact opinion either through persuasion or through framing since, in a way, the two speech treatments are two different frames. One says that the issue is about religion, and calls to mind those specific considerations, the other says that the issue is about something else, calling to mind a different set of considerations.

However, there is an important distinction to be made between this experiment and the typical framing study. Normally, a participant or respondent is not made aware that an attempt is being made to frame an issue. Rather, the treatments consist of slight variations in question wording, a substitution of different quotes in a news story or a change in the origin of the frame. This is not how political speeches work. Those who hear a speech know in advance that the
speaker is trying to influence them. This awareness can have important effects on their response. I return to this key point later in explaining the results.

**Results**

The first step in the analysis involved a series of difference of means tests, the results of which are reported in Tables 12.3, 12.4 and 12.5.

Table 12.3 compares the mean issue opinion scores between the control group, those students who were not exposed to any variant of speech, and the group that read the religious speeches. Values on all five questions range from 1 to 5, where higher scores indicate greater support for the speaker’s position.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Control (N=87)</th>
<th>Religious Treatment (N=81)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Aid</td>
<td>4.00 (.11)</td>
<td>3.80 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Rights</td>
<td>4.24 (.10)</td>
<td>4.19 (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>4.01 (.10)</td>
<td>3.93 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affair</td>
<td>3.86 (.13)</td>
<td>4.00 (.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>3.82 (.11)</td>
<td>3.82 (.14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12.3: Difference of Means- Control Group vs. Religious Treatment

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Values represent the score on the matching 5 point issue opinion question; higher scores indicate greater support for the president’s position. **p< .01; *p< .05; two-tailed test.

For example, the environmental speech included in questionnaire #1 made a religious argument about the need for muscular environmental protections. A response of 5 on the
environmental question that followed signified strong support for such regulations, and hence reflected agreement with the speech’s message. Once more, if religious rhetoric is meaningful, the means in the religious treatment group should be significantly higher than the means in the control group. That turns out not to the case, however. In fact, there is no significant difference between the two groups on any of the five issues. On healthcare, the two means are practically identical, both being rounded off to 3.82.

Table 12.4 repeats the same analysis but this time the means of the control group and those of the group that read the secular speeches are compared. What this table reveals is that secular rhetoric appears to be slightly more powerful than religious rhetoric.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Control (N=87)</th>
<th>Secular Treatment (N=85)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Foreign Aid</em></td>
<td>4.00 (.11)</td>
<td>4.05 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Civil Rights</em></td>
<td>4.24 (.10)</td>
<td>4.33 (.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Environment</em></td>
<td>4.01 (.10)</td>
<td>4.11 (.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Affair</em></td>
<td>3.86* (.13)</td>
<td>4.19* (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Healthcare</em></td>
<td>3.82 (.11)</td>
<td>4.01 (.12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Values represent the score on the matching 5 point issue opinion question; higher scores indicate greater support for the president’s position. **p< .01; *p< .05; two-tailed test.

In contrast to the previous analysis, on one of the five issues we do find a significant difference in opinion. If a participant was exposed to a speech that argued that a presidential
affair was a private matter between a president and his wife, and further that by focusing on such matters the nation is distracting itself from more pressing problems, then an individual was significantly more likely to disagree with the statement that any president who admits to an affair should resign from office.

More evidence suggesting that secular rhetoric is more powerful than religious rhetoric can be found in Table 12.5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 12.5: Difference of Means- Strength of Argument</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Issue</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Values represent the score on the matching 5 point strength of argument question; higher scores indicate that a respondent found the argument more persuasive. **p< .01; *p< .05; two-tailed test.

Table 12.5 presents the results for a difference of means test on the prompt that asked participants to evaluate “how strong an argument” they felt the president was making. Responses ran from 1 to 5 with 1 being “very weak” and 5 being “very strong.” As the table shows, the secular arguments were uniformly seen as the stronger of the two. On three of five issues-foreign aid, environmental protection and government support for healthcare-
differences between the two groups were statistically significant. For foreign aid and the environment, the difference between the means was significant at the .01 level.

Overall, these tables certainly imply that religious rhetoric is inconsequential and, moreover, that it pales in comparison to the potential force of secular rhetoric. However, more in-depth analysis still needs to be conducted. These three tables do not at all address the very real possibility that religious rhetoric may only appeal to certain types of individuals. In theory, the effect of exposure to religious rhetoric may be limited to religious people, those who are most familiar with the language and most likely to take it seriously. It should be acknowledged that, if true, this effect would still not be a strong endorsement for instrumental religious rhetoric. The types of policy changes presidents have sought via religious rhetoric, things like landmark civil rights laws and support for wars, were, by definition, major initiatives. The success of these campaigns demanded the support of Americans of all stripes, and not just that of the faithful. Still, it is a question worth investigating nevertheless.

The best method to address this issue is by means of regression models using interaction terms. Akin to how a cup of coffee only becomes sweeter if you add sugar and stir (either one of these actions by itself fails to change the flavor of the coffee), it may be that a speaker needs to be exposed to a religious speech and have a high degree of confidence in the Bible or the like. The use of interaction terms, which is common to experimental methodology, can help us to identify such effects if they exist (Gelman and Hill 2007, 167-198).

Tables 12.6, 12.7, 12.8, 12.9 and 12.10 estimate five sets of regression models that take the five policy opinion questions which were answered by all participants as their dependent
variables. Two dummy variables were created to indicate whether a participant was exposed to a religious speech or a secular speech. For each, a value of 1 indicates that the participant read the speech, a value of 0 indicates that they did not. Additional dummy variables were created to capture whether a respondent was female (1 = yes, 0 = no), whether a respondent has lived in the U.S. South for five or more years (1 = yes, 0 = no) and whether a respondent self-identified as a racial or ethnic minority (1 = yes, 0 = no). Other variables measured a participant’s ideology and partisan affiliation. These two measures were the standard 7-point self-placement scales used throughout much of the political science literature. Higher values indicate that a student was more conservative or more Republican. Two variables also represent a participant’s political interest and political information. The political interest variable is a scale from 1 to 4. Answer choices ranged from whether a student reported following government and public affairs “hardly at all” (a value of 1) to “most of the time” (a value of 4). The political knowledge variable is the Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993, 1996) five question scale. A score of 5 on this variable would indicate that a respondent provided correct answers to all five knowledge questions.

Last, the models include six different variables meant to capture a participant’s religious affiliation, religious behavior and religious beliefs. Dummy variables were generated to indicate if a participant self-identified as Protestant, Catholic or Jewish (for all, 1 = yes, 0 = no). A variable was also created to measure church attendance. This variable runs from 1-5 where lower scores indicate that a respondent reported attending services more often. A variable was created to measure a participant’s belief in the Bible. Four statements were offered and participants were asked to select the one which was closest to their own view. Values run from 1
Table 12.6: Predictors for Opinion on U.S. Engagement With the World

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech</td>
<td>-.07 (.16)</td>
<td>.01 (.16)</td>
<td>.87 (1.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular Speech</td>
<td>.05 (.15)</td>
<td>.14 (.15)</td>
<td>.13 (.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.29* (.13)</td>
<td>.23 (.13)</td>
<td>.20 (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>-.01 (.17)</td>
<td>.07 (.17)</td>
<td>.11 (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>-.07 (.13)</td>
<td>-.13 (.14)</td>
<td>-.14 (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>-.04 (.07)</td>
<td>-.08 (.07)</td>
<td>-.08 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>-.09 (.06)</td>
<td>-.12* (.06)</td>
<td>-.13* (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Interest</td>
<td>.17 (.09)</td>
<td>.16 (.09)</td>
<td>.14 (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Info</td>
<td>.02 (.06)</td>
<td>.05 (.06)</td>
<td>.06 (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>.23 (.21)</td>
<td>.45 (.26)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
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<td>.21 (.24)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>.05 (.24)</td>
<td>.22 (.29)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Attendance</td>
<td>-.15* (.07)</td>
<td>-.10 (.09)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in the Bible</td>
<td>-.19 (.11)</td>
<td>-.19 (.14)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in God</td>
<td>-.12 (.06)</td>
<td>-.14* (.07)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Protestant</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Catholic</td>
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<td>-.38 (.41)</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Religious Speech x Jewish</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Religious Speech x Belief in the Bible</td>
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<td>.07 (.13)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>5.07** (.68)</td>
<td>4.99** (.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
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<td>.14</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries are unstandardized ordinary least squares regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. **p < .01; *p < .05
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech</td>
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<td>.12 (.16)</td>
<td>.92 (1.19)</td>
</tr>
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<td>.09 (.15)</td>
<td>.10 (.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>.50** (.13)</td>
<td>.50** (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>.04 (.16)</td>
<td>.01 (.17)</td>
<td>-.00 (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>.15 (.13)</td>
<td>.14 (.14)</td>
<td>.13 (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>-.26** (.07)</td>
<td>-.24** (.08)</td>
<td>-.24** (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>-.06 (.06)</td>
<td>-.08 (.06)</td>
<td>-.09 (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Interest</td>
<td>-.05 (.09)</td>
<td>-.10 (.09)</td>
<td>-.10 (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Info</td>
<td>.09 (.06)</td>
<td>.06 (.06)</td>
<td>.06 (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>.16 (.21)</td>
<td>.13 (.26)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>-.09 (.20)</td>
<td>.08 (.24)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>.05 (.24)</td>
<td>.04 (.24)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Attendance</td>
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<td>-.17 (.09)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in the Bible</td>
<td>-.04 (.12)</td>
<td>.11 (.14)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in God</td>
<td>-.14* (.06)</td>
<td>-.12 (.07)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Protestant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.19 (.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Catholic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.30 (.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Jewish</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.06 (.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Church Attendance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.18 (.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Belief in the Bible</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.46 (.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Belief in God</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.09 (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>4.57** (.40)</td>
<td>5.89** (.68)</td>
<td>5.65** (.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries are unstandardized ordinary least squares regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. **p<.01; *p<.05
Table 12.8: Predictors for Opinion on Environment Regulation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech</td>
<td>.02 (.13)</td>
<td>-.00 (.13)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular Speech</td>
<td>.11 (.12)</td>
<td>.06 (.13)</td>
<td>.09 (.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.11 (.11)</td>
<td>.16 (.11)</td>
<td>.16 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>-.13 (.14)</td>
<td>-.15 (.14)</td>
<td>-.12 (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>.10 (.11)</td>
<td>.09 (.11)</td>
<td>.04 (.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>-.23** (.06)</td>
<td>-.22** (.06)</td>
<td>-.24** (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>-.10 (.05)</td>
<td>-.08 (.05)</td>
<td>-.07 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Interest</td>
<td>-.07 (.07)</td>
<td>-.13 (.08)</td>
<td>-.13 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Info</td>
<td>.05 (.05)</td>
<td>.07 (.05)</td>
<td>.07 (.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>-.17 (.17)</td>
<td>.08 (.21)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>-.12 (.16)</td>
<td>.35 (.19)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>-.21 (.20)</td>
<td>-.14 (.23)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Attendance</td>
<td>-.03 (.06)</td>
<td>.00 (.07)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in the Bible</td>
<td>-.01 (.10)</td>
<td>.06 (.11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in God</td>
<td>-.08 (.05)</td>
<td>-.06 (.06)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Protestant</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.89* (.36)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Catholic</td>
<td></td>
<td>-1.40** (.33)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Jewish</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.50 (.40)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Church Attendance</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.21 (.12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Belief in the Bible</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.13 (.20)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Belief in God</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.04 (.11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>4.88** (.34)</td>
<td>5.43** (.57)</td>
<td>4.95** (.60)</td>
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<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.37</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries are unstandardized ordinary least squares regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. **p<.01; *p<.05
Table 12.9: Predictors for Opinion on If a President Should Resign Due to an Affair

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech</td>
<td>.17 (.15)</td>
<td>.14 (.16)</td>
<td>.11 (1.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular Speech</td>
<td>.24 (.15)</td>
<td>.19 (.15)</td>
<td>.19 (.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.12 (.13)</td>
<td>.13 (.13)</td>
<td>.16 (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>.36* (.16)</td>
<td>.37* (.17)</td>
<td>.35* (.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>.07 (.13)</td>
<td>.15 (.14)</td>
<td>.16 (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>-.24** (.07)</td>
<td>-.18* (.07)</td>
<td>-.18* (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>-.05 (.06)</td>
<td>-.05 (.06)</td>
<td>-.05 (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Interest</td>
<td>.10 (.09)</td>
<td>.09 (.09)</td>
<td>.10 (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Info</td>
<td>.23** (.06)</td>
<td>.24** (.06)</td>
<td>.25** (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>-.14 (.21)</td>
<td>-.16 (.26)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>.09 (.19)</td>
<td>.09 (.24)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>.09 (.24)</td>
<td>-.13 (.29)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Attendance</td>
<td>.03 (.07)</td>
<td>.04 (.09)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in the Bible</td>
<td>-.03 (.11)</td>
<td>-.03 (.14)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in God</td>
<td>-.08 (.06)</td>
<td>-.08 (.07)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Protestant</td>
<td>.03 (.45)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Catholic</td>
<td>.03 (.41)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Jewish</td>
<td>.67 (.50)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Church Attendance</td>
<td>-.01 (.15)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Belief in the Bible</td>
<td>-.01 (.25)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Belief in God</td>
<td>.00 (.14)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.24** (.40)</td>
<td>3.33** (.68)</td>
<td>3.21** (.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R^2</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>245</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries are unstandardized ordinary least squares regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. **p<.01; *p<.05
Table 12.10: Predictors for Opinion on Government Provision of Healthcare

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech</td>
<td>.18 (.14)</td>
<td>.20 (.14)</td>
<td>.04 (1.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular Speech</td>
<td>.18 (.14)</td>
<td>.23 (.14)</td>
<td>.22 (.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.16 (.12)</td>
<td>.15 (.12)</td>
<td>.09 (.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>-.00 (.15)</td>
<td>.02 (.15)</td>
<td>.07 (.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>.23* (.11)</td>
<td>.20 (.13)</td>
<td>.18 (.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>-.34** (.06)</td>
<td>-.37** (.07)</td>
<td>-.38** (.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>-.20** (.05)</td>
<td>-.19** (.06)</td>
<td>-.20** (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Interest</td>
<td>.07 (.08)</td>
<td>.06 (.09)</td>
<td>.02 (.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Info</td>
<td>.01 (.05)</td>
<td>.01 (.06)</td>
<td>.03 (.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protestant</td>
<td>-.21 (.19)</td>
<td>.08 (.23)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>-.15 (.18)</td>
<td>.03 (.22)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>-.23 (.22)</td>
<td>.07 (.26)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Attendance</td>
<td>-.11 (.07)</td>
<td>-.17* (.08)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in the Bible</td>
<td>.09 (.11)</td>
<td>.19 (.12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in God</td>
<td>.02 (.06)</td>
<td>-.05 (.06)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Protestant</td>
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<td>-.68 (.41)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Catholic</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.45 (.37)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Jewish</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.77 (.45)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Church Attendance</td>
<td></td>
<td>.10 (.14)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Belief in the Bible</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.26 (.23)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Speech x Belief in God</td>
<td></td>
<td>.19 (.12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>4.92** (.37)</td>
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<td>5.45** (.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
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<td>.47</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries are unstandardized ordinary least squares regression coefficients. Standard errors are in parentheses. **p< .01; *p< .05
to 4 and lower values suggest an individual places more weight on the contents of the Bible. A value of 1 signifies agreement with the statement “The Bible is God’s Word and all it says is true.” Finally, a similar variable was constructed to measure an individual’s beliefs about God. This variable ranges from 1 to 6 where higher values signify greater faith in God. A value of 6 would mean that a respondent felt the statement “I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it” most closely represented their own views.

In this sequence of tables, the key models are the ones found in the third column. These are the fully specified models. In each, the dummy variable for a religious speech is interacted with the six other religious variables, i.e. religious speech x church attendance, and so on.

A quick examination of the results from these regressions immediately yields some important observations. As expected given the results from the difference of means tests, in not a single one of the fifteen different models are any of the speech dummy coefficients, neither religious nor secular, significant. Exposure to a speech of either type does not predict an individual’s opinion on any of these five different issues.

Importantly, the interaction terms fare no better. In four of the five models all six of the interaction terms are insignificant. The only exception is found in the model predicting opinion on environmental regulation. Here, the interactions between exposure to a religious speech and both the Catholicism and Protestantism dummies are significant. Indeed, the coefficient for religious speech x Catholic is substantively large and significant at the .01 level. However, the negative signs of both terms are in the wrong direction. If a participant self-identified as a member of either faith and received a religious speech they were actually less likely to agree
with the speaker’s policy position. This result therefore undermines the premise that religious individuals might respond more positively to religious arguments. What instead could be happening is that perhaps these individuals were reacting negatively to what they viewed as a crass manipulation of their faith. In the end, these models suggest that religious rhetoric does not impact the policy opinions of even the most devout and, further, that this type of language may possibly alienate religious individuals as well.

It is still valuable to consider what variables do predict opinion on these five issues. What emerges from these models is a sense of the pre-eminent importance of ideology and partisanship. The coefficient for ideology is significant in all of the models, mostly at the .01 level, with the exception of the three models that estimate opinion on U.S. engagement with the world. Intuitively, though, this result seems to make sense. It is hard to detect an ideological direction to opinion on a policy like foreign aid. Conservatives, for example, are widely thought to be split between isolationists and a more robust, internationally oriented neo-conservative wing (Kagan 2006). In all of the other models, the signs of the different ideology coefficients are in the right direction. These values show that as an individual becomes more conservative, he or she becomes more likely to think the country has gone too far in pushing civil rights, that environmental regulations are too much of a restriction on business, that a president who admits to an affair should resign his office and that healthcare should not be a government responsibility. All of these are logical findings.

Partisanship proves to be almost equally important in explaining issue opinion. An individual’s self-identification with either party is key to understanding his or her opinion on
isolationism and healthcare. The coefficients show that as an individual becomes more Republican, he or she becomes less supportive of a vibrant international role for America and less supportive of government provision of healthcare. These findings, too, are logical.

Thus, rhetoric does not appear to matter, but ideology and partisanship most certainly do. Yet, even putting aside the similar findings of the case studies, we should not be surprised by these results. Researchers have already documented that the source and type of a communication can impact whether a person will be receptive to it or not. Druckman (2001) is one scholar who has actively sought to establish the limits of framing effects. Druckman is of the opinion that people look to elites for guidance in helping them sort through the various policy debates. But individuals are selective when it comes to which elites they choose to believe. They will only heed those sources which are considered credible. Druckman’s empirical study randomly provided student participants with a statement on spending attributed to a credible source (Colin Powell) and a noncredible source (Jerry Springer). In a second experiment, Druckman presented participants with articles covering a Klan rally that were said to appear in either the New York Times (credible) or the National Enquirer (noncredible). Both experiments show that source credibility is prerequisite for successful framing.

Hartman and Weber (2009) labor in a similar spirit, testifying to the importance of an identity match between a frame’s source and recipient. The authors depart from the premise that individuals frequently use shortcuts, especially the positions of fellow partisans, as a low cost method of forming opinions (Popkin 1991). Their hypothesis is that stronger individual identification with the source of a message makes it more likely that an individual will be
susceptible to framing effects. Their empirical study, also drawing on a population of undergraduate students, used newspaper articles on a Klan rally where the source of either a free speech or public order frame varied between liberal and conservative groups. When there was an ideological mismatch between the source and the recipient, the two men found no evidence of framing effects. Other scholars who come to similar conclusions about the limits of framing effects include Brewer (2001, 2003) and Druckman and Nelson (2003).

Even Zaller (1992), one of the most pessimistic of all when it comes to citizen competence, accepts that certain arguments can be rejected based on their source. If citizens are well-informed, Zaller allows, they tend to react to ideas “on the basis of external cues about their partisan implications” (45). Collectively, this research suggests that the source of a message, particularly if it is a partisan source, is a very important factor in predicting whether the message will be persuasive or not. Along those lines, Table 12.11 suggests important insights that may very well account for why these rhetorical appeals were apparently ignored.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Religious Treatment</th>
<th>Secular Treatment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% Republican / % Democrat</td>
<td>% Republican / % Democrat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Aid</td>
<td>70.00% / 30.00%</td>
<td>34.94% / 65.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Rights</td>
<td>24.69% / 75.31%</td>
<td>5.88% / 94.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>36.71% / 63.29%</td>
<td>10.59% / 89.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affair</td>
<td>25.00% / 75.00%</td>
<td>11.90% / 88.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>8.75% / 91.25%</td>
<td>2.38% / 97.62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12.11 reports the suspected partisan affiliation of the speaker for all five issues in
both the religious and secular speech groups. To begin, it is clear that the respondents tended to weakly associate religious language with Republican presidents. On the civil rights, when given a secular speech, just 5.88% of participants thought the president was a Republican. When given a religious speech, however, 24.69% of the sample thought the president was a Republican, an increase of almost 19%. On environmental protection, when given a secular speech, just 10.59% of students thought the president was a Republican. When given a religious speech, however, that same figure soars to 36.71%, an increase of over 26%. This finding, in itself, is intrinsically interesting since the actual presidents the frames were based on were Democrats in three of the five cases.

At the same time, for four of these issues, individuals nonetheless detected a clear partisan direction to the policies. The civil rights, environment, affair and healthcare policies were all thought to be Democratic initiatives, and by wide margins. On healthcare, for example, 97.62% of those receiving a secular speech and 91.25% of those receiving a religious speech associated the arguments with the Democrats. Likewise, on civil rights, 94.12% of those receiving a secular speech and 75.31% of those receiving a religious speech associated the arguments with the Democrats.

What this means is that participants were able to detect strong partisan and ideological cues in the speeches, despite not being told who the president was or what party he belonged to. This data helps us to understand why ideology and partisanship were so important in explaining the results. When over 90% of subjects associate an issue with the Democrats, it makes sense that opinions toward that party and its ideas would guide an individuals’ response. It is no secret
that partisanship is one of the single most important factors determining political behavior (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2002). Notably, the one issue where these cues did not seem to be available was foreign aid. Here, by a strong margin, those receiving the secular speech thought the speaker was a Democrat (65.06% to 34.94%). In contrast, those who received the religious speech thought the speaker was a Republican by an equally large margin (70.00% to 30.00%). Thus it is not surprising that it was only in the regression models for foreign aid that the coefficients for ideology and partisanship failed to reach statistical significance.

Research on political communication most commonly involves very subtle treatments. A change in of a few lines in the body of the text is sometimes all that differs. But this is not how political speeches work. When an individual listens to a president speak, they know who he is, what he stands for and what he is trying to accomplish. Research has shown that when these kinds of conditions are met, when individuals can evaluate the credibility and partisan and ideological disposition of a source, they are more than capable of resisting attempts at persuasion. Such has been the case here. Respondents, despite not being told, had strong presumptions of the identity of the presidential speakers. These feelings then guided their opinions on the policy issues. The findings of this experiment are thus very much in tune with the work of Nelson and Oxley (1999), Druckman (2001), Brewer (2001) and others - scholars who have painted the acceptance of political communications as a deliberative, contingent process.

Conclusions

This experimental chapter has presented a possible causal explanation for the repeated
failures of religious rhetoric that are documented in this dissertation’s nine case studies: instrumental religious rhetoric is inherently unpersuasive. Difference of means tests have shown that exposure to a religious speech did not lead to a significant change in opinion on any of the five different issues that were being tested. Secular rhetoric was slightly more promising. Exposure to a secular speech caused a significant opinion change on a presidential affair and the secular arguments were judged by respondents to be significantly stronger than their religious counterparts. Still, regression analysis showed that issue opinion was mainly driven by ideology and partisanship. Although religious rhetoric was slightly more likely to be seen as a Republican tactic, participants recognized strong source cues from the speech that led them to see all but one of the issues as a Democratic policy. With this information at hand, respondents were well positioned to screen the speeches’ messages, something extant research has shown people to be more than capable of doing.

Admittedly, some will want to instinctively dismiss these results for the simple reason that the subject population was made up of college students, and, moreover, students at secular and liberal Columbia University. If a person wishes to dismiss research for the sole reason that it is based on students subjects they will have to cast a very wide net. Kam et al. (2007) find that from 1990 through 2006 one quarter of all experimental articles published in top-tier political science journals used student subjects. It is not enough, however, to merely point to the commonality of students subjects as a defense. This skepticism is not justified for several more important reasons.

Arguably the most known critic of work based on student subjects is Sears (1986). Sears
worried that the field of social psychology was being crippled by its overreliance on “college student subjects tested in the academic laboratory with academiclike materials” (515). College students, Sears wrote, are characterized by their questionable sense of self and their strong need for peer approval. Their political and social attitudes are known to be less crystallized and less stable than those of older adults. When combined with the unique features of a laboratory setting, Sears speculated that a number of biases may have been introduced, biases that plagued the discipline’s conclusions. One core finding of psychology is that individuals are easily influenced. As Sears observes, “Almost every textbook has chapters on attitudes and attitude change. Almost always the message is that judgments and attitudes are readily changed and that social psychology provides an extensive roster of successful change techniques” (522). Perhaps, Sears wondered, this finding of easy attitude change is only a product of the data base from which it was discovered - college students who are known to have unformed attitudes to begin with.

In an unusual twist, though, Sears adds to the assurance one can have about the results reported from this experiment. Sears’ entire article was predicated on the idea that college students are too easily influenced by experimental treatments. If true, this characteristic of the subject population should have biased this study towards identifying a number of effects from political speech. The opposite occurred. Religious rhetoric was not important in changing or explaining opinions, even among the most religious individuals. Thus, the use of student subjects should actually make one more confident about the validity of the findings. Presidential religious rhetoric must be extraordinarily weak if it cannot even influence as susceptible a
population as college students!

A second defense for the use of student subjects is that the differences between students and the general population have been overblown. Druckman and Kam (2011) undertake a comparison of the means of a sample of college students and a sample of the general population. In most cases, the difference is not significant. They show that college students and the general population are, on average, indistinguishable when it comes to important political characteristics like partisanship, belief in limited government, views on homosexuality, social trust and political interest. As they say, “Overall, however, we are impressed by just how similar students are to the nonstudent general population on key covariates often of interest to political scientists” (51).

Moreover, students process information in the same ways that older adults do. Indeed, in a meta-analysis of 136 papers on the framing of risk, Kuhberger (1998) finds that there is no difference between student and non-student populations in their receptivity to the effect. All in all, students might not be very different from everyone else.

A last criticism of the experimental design may highlight the use of not just student subjects, but Columbia student subjects. The claim could conceivably be made that Columbia is a setting biased against religious rhetoric. Columbia is widely perceived as a very secular institution. True, Columbia in some ways is not representative. The entire sample of 253 students had an average ideology score of 2.94, which is just to the left of “slightly liberal.” When this question is asked by the ANES, typically the national mean comes out to somewhere between 4, “moderate,” and 5, “slightly conservative.” In the experiment sample, the mean of the church attendance variable was 3.89, which translates to most students reporting that they
attend religious services only “a few times a year.” So, there might, indeed, be reason for concern. However, recall that the inclusion of interaction terms in the fully specified regression models was meant to explore the possibility that religious rhetoric was more appealing to the churched. This did not turn out to be the case. And, if Columbia does not look exactly like America now, America is likely to look ever more like Columbia in the future.

In a revealing recent study, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2010a) found that Millennials, those Americans aged 18-29, are much less religiously active than other generations. In fact, 25% of the Millennial generation chooses not to affiliate with any particular faith at all. These individuals describe their religious practices as “atheist,” “agnostic” or “nothing in particular.” By comparison, young Americans today are significantly more unaffiliated than members of the Baby Boomer generation were at a comparable point in their own life cycles (13% in the late 1970s). A large part of this trend is being driven by the nearly one-in-five adults under 30 who say they were raised in a religious tradition but have since left the faith of their fathers. Young adults also report attending religious services less often than any other cohort. 33% of Millennials say they attend services at least once a week. That same figure is 41% for adults 30 and older, and over 50% for people 65 and older. Millennials read Scripture less often; 27% of young adults say they read Scripture on a weekly basis versus 36% of those 30 and older. And they pray less often, as well; 48% of adults under age 30 say they pray daily. In contrast, 61% of those in their 50s and early 60s and 68% of those 65 and older pray daily.

The growing secularization of younger Americans is evident. Religion is less important to contemporary young adults than it is to their parents today and than it was to their parents
when they, themselves, were younger. As generational replacement occurs, one can expect to encounter a progressively less religious America. This is what is meant when I say in the future America will look like Columbia, even if it currently Columbia only looks like a slice (the broader Millennial generation) of America. Hence, any president’s religious rhetoric will increasingly be aimed at a secular audience. These are sobering statistics, indeed, for presidents who might continue to try, and likely fail, to appeal to the people based on religion.
Chapter 13

Conclusion

This dissertation began by identifying three unique kinds of religious rhetoric, each of which, I have argued, must be seen as distinctive. First, presidents use ceremonial religious rhetoric when religion suits the occasion. Examples of ceremonial religious rhetoric that were discussed included holiday addresses, funeral eulogies and even speeches that were delivered from church pulpits. Presidents are expected to use ceremonial religious rhetoric. Controversy is only likely to attend those instances where a president instead avoids mention of God, a lesson Obama learned the hard way this past Thanksgiving. Second, presidents use comforting and calming religious rhetoric in the aftermath of events like terrorist attacks, hurricanes or domestic riots. At these moments, the president employs religious rhetoric in an attempt to solace a wounded people or pacify an angry country. George W. Bush was shown to have extensive experience with this second, equally noncontroversial, type of religious rhetoric. Finally, every president save Truman and Nixon has used instrumental religious rhetoric to try to convince interested parties to support a personal or political objective, such as passing a piece of legislation or ending a scandal. Each of the eight case study chapters this dissertation contains explored a different example of instrumental religious rhetoric.

Table 13.1 provides a summary of the major religious themes that were highlighted in each of these chapters. Be aware that this list is a simplified one. A number of smaller features of the religious rhetoric of different presidents are not included, such as George H.W. Bush’s calls for multiple days of prayer, or Eisenhower’s light/dark imagery or Ford’s discussion of the
Table 13.1: Summary of Major Instrumental Religious Rhetoric Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>President</th>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Religious Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Dwight Eisenhower | Mutual Security Funding | - Cold War as a battle between atheism + religion  
                        |                               | - Christian brotherhood                                                           |
|                 |                  | - Relevance of Golden Rule                                                     |
|                 |                  | - Jeremiads on selfishness                                                     |
| Jimmy Carter    | Energy Reform   | - Jeremiads on materialism/consumerism                                         |
|                 |                  | - Stewardship/ environment is a blessing from God                             |
|                 |                  | - Co-opting of message of John Paul II                                        |
| Ronald Reagan   | Defense Spending | - Cold War as a battle between atheism + religion                             |
|                 |                  | - Biblical support found in the Psalms, Gospel of Luke                        |
|                 |                  | - General spiritual descriptions of purposes of defense spending              |
| George H.W. Bush | Persian Gulf War | - Conflict as an example of good vs. evil                                     |
|                 |                  | - War meets criteria of just war theory                                       |
|                 |                  | - God supports the U.S. mission                                                |
| George W. Bush  | War on Terror    | - Conflict as an example of good vs. evil                                     |
|                 |                  | - U.S. is fighting for freedom/God’s purpose                                  |
| John Kennedy    | Civil Rights     | - Segregation is immoral, conflicts with Scripture                             |
| Lyndon Johnson  | Civil Rights     | - Kennedy as a martyr figure                                                  |
|                 |                  | - Relevance of the Golden Rule                                                 |
|                 |                  | - Warnings of eternal judgment                                                 |
|                 |                  | - General moral statements about importance of civil rights                   |
| Gerald Ford     | Nixon Pardon     | - Importance of being merciful                                                 |
|                 |                  | - The pardon as a matter of God and conscience                                |
| Bill Clinton    | Lewinsky Scandal | - Personal forgiveness depending on his willingness to forgive others         |
|                 |                  | - Scandal as a blessing for the country                                        |
|                 |                  | - Preference for religious words like “sin,” “atone,” and “repent” over secular alternatives |
import of Rosh Hashanah. This table is only meant to capture the most prominent themes marking each president’s religious discourse. Much more complexity has been found within each case study than this table is meant to suggest. Still, what is interesting is how little overlap there is between the cases. Certainly some themes did recur in the rhetoric of multiple presidents. For instance, both Eisenhower and Reagan depicted the Cold War as a battle against atheism. Both George H.W. Bush and his son spoke of good and evil. Both Eisenhower and Johnson made frequent reference to the relevance of the Golden Rule. But mostly presidents constructed religious rationales that were specific to their goals. Ford talked of the importance of being merciful because it made sense to do so in the context of the pardon. Mercy would not, however, be appropriate to a discussion of defense spending or the War on Terror.

This observation merely underscores the fundamental perspective of this study- that being that religious rhetoric has often been a strategic tool for a goal-oriented president. The case studies contain ample evidence that each president chose his religious rhetoric carefully. We learned in chapter five that Carter’s jeremiads on energy were a direct byproduct of a polling report produced by one his top advisors. In chapter seven, we saw how George H.W. Bush built an extensive communications operation that was designed to build grass-roots support for his Gulf War policy. When Bush’s pollster told the President in October that the administration’s rhetoric was too unfocused, Bush streamlined his public comments, playing up the more clear-cut religious argument for action. In chapter nine, I discussed how Johnson came to use religious rhetoric on civil rights because he wanted to “use the moral persuasion of my office to make people feel that segregation was a curse they’d carry with them to their graves” (Woods
In other chapters, I have surveyed how presidents could, in general, be extraordinarily shrewd when it came to religion. Reagan, for example, would speak to anti-abortion protesters every year on the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, but only by telephone so as to ensure that he would not be too closely associated with the rally when it was covered on the evening news.

To an extent, this kind of information was superfluous. In an age of speechwriters, press secretaries and focus groups, it is justifiably taken for granted that presidents choose their words carefully. Even one verbal gaffe can cause a full week’s worth of headaches for the leader of the free world. Nevertheless, this evidence, when combined with the impression one gains from Table 13.1, underscores that presidents do not use religious rhetoric simply because they are comfortable speaking in these terms; they use religious rhetoric because they think they can benefit by making salient the American people’s most sacred beliefs. Each president picked religious themes that were applicable and appropriate for their given objective. They were not drawing upon some vague civil religion. Rather, they were narrowly interpreting traditional religious doctrine for their own political purposes.

In fact, this dissertation has also shown that many presidents are actually not comfortable talking about their faith. It was Truman who confessed, “I am by religion like everything else. I think there is more in acting than in talking.” Truman accordingly rejected religious “stuffed shirts” and tried to downplay the discussion of religious issues, which he often felt was counterproductive (Spalding 2009, 220-222).

Kennedy faced a different set of complications. As a young Representative from a
heavily Catholic district in Massachusetts, Kennedy was initially a prominent defender of Catholic interests. Yet as he emerged as a candidate for national office, Kennedy started to steadily downplay his support for Catholic causes, changing his stance on issues such as aid to parochial schools. Kennedy later faced a great deal of bigotry during his run for the White House in 1960, forcing him to proclaim his belief in an inviolate separation of church and state before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association. JFK wanted to distract people from his religion, not draw attention to it by peppering his public remarks with spiritual content.

Carter, on the other hand, did not exactly hide his Christian beliefs. He continued to teach Sunday school as president. But he, too, still tried to walk a tightrope on religion. For one, Carter’s intense evangelical beliefs were unfamiliar to many Americans and, as such, they constituted what one of his top staffers called the “weirdo factor.” Moreover, as a Baptist, Carter was equally committed to a strict separation of church and state. As President, he promised to uphold Roe v Wade, he consistently opposed school prayer and he fought against tuition tax credits for parochial schools. He resisted regular meetings with religious groups and paid little attention to their concerns. Therefore it is little surprise that Carter made fewer explicit references to the Bible or to his own faith than most other presidents, including Lincoln, Roosevelt, Eisenhower and Reagan (Smith 2006, 296). Even those that were comfortable talking about religion, men like George W. Bush, had to still tread carefully lest they be excused of exploitation and sacrilege.

Along these lines, it has been proved that a crisis was a necessary if not a sufficient condition for the appearance of instrumental religious rhetoric. In each chapter, a president faced
a visible deterioration in his political circumstances before beginning to voice religious arguments for his policy. Reagan was buffeted by recession, deficits and plunging approval ratings. Kennedy confronted protestors in the streets, police brutality and a country coming apart at the seems. Ford had the albatross of Nixon’s unresolved situation hanging around his neck, swallowing up all his time. Clinton was days away from the Congressional Democrats asking for his resignation. And so on.

However, a crisis has not been enough to completely overcome this presidential hesitancy. Presidents still limit their rhetoric only to those issues where it seems reasonable. To look again at Table 13.1, one can see the clustering of the cases by issue area. Chapters four through eight were examples of presidents using instrumental religious rhetoric on questions of national defense, matters like funding for foreign aid or support for the package of policies comprising the War on Terror. Chapter nine merged two case studies. Both Kennedy and Johnson used instrumental religious rhetoric to convince the country to support their civil rights goals. Finally, in Chapters ten and eleven, Presidents Ford and Clinton embraced religious rhetoric as the best solution to political scandals that were sinking their Administration.

I have argued that, not coincidentally, these are the same three issue areas where religious rhetoric is most appropriate. The links between religious rhetoric and foreign policy are easy to see. Americans have long subscribed to a series of beliefs that grant America a providential role in the world. Dating from a John Winthrop sermon aboard the Arbella in 1630 (“For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.”), most Americans have believed themselves to be a chosen people. 58% of all Americans, in fact, either
“mostly” or “completely” agree with the statement “God has granted America a special role in human history” (Public Religion Research Institute 2010). On the one hand, being a chosen people is an injunction to remain separate from the world. But more often, including in the cases in this study, this vision has been used to argue for engagement.

Religious rhetoric also easily applies to civil rights questions. A good number of religious tenets like the Golden Rule (“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you”) specify how individuals should treat each other (Mt 7.12). Likewise, the language of religion, prioritizing concepts like sin, forgiveness and mercy, also seems fitting for presidential scandals.

The most significant finding of this dissertation is that, regardless of whether the issues match the religious rhetoric or not, instrumental religious rhetoric does not work. The case studies evaluated the effect of religious rhetoric on three different actors - the public, the media and the Congress. The results all tend in the same direction. Opinion most commonly was nonresponsive, the media criticized both the presidents’ ideas and the religious content of their appeals and Congress did not embrace their proposals. The case studies range from clear, outright failures (Eisenhower, Kennedy, Ford, Carter, Reagan, etc.) to those where no reasonable argument can be made that religious rhetoric had either a positive or negative effect on a president’s fate (Johnson, Clinton). Table 13.2 summarizes the public and media reaction to the major speeches analyzed in the case studies where presidents used instrumental religious rhetoric. The pattern that emerges is not a pretty picture.

Most speeches did not impact a president’s approval ratings. In fact, on average, a major
Table 13.2: Public and Media Reaction to Major Speeches Using Religious Rhetoric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>President</th>
<th>Speech Date</th>
<th>Opinion Before</th>
<th>Opinion After</th>
<th>Change</th>
<th>Avg. Editorial</th>
<th>%Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dwight Eisenhower</td>
<td>1/21/57</td>
<td>73 (1/17)</td>
<td>72 (2/7)</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5/21/57</td>
<td>62 (5/17)</td>
<td>64 (6/6)</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12/3/59</td>
<td>67 (12/3)</td>
<td>77 (12/10)</td>
<td>+10</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>46.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12/23/59</td>
<td>77 (12/10)</td>
<td>66 (1/6)</td>
<td>-11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1/7/60</td>
<td>66 (1/6)</td>
<td>64 (2/4)</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Kennedy</td>
<td>6/11/63</td>
<td>64 (5/23)</td>
<td>61 (6/21)</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyndon Johnson</td>
<td>11/27/63</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>78 (12/5)</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11/28/63</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerald Ford</td>
<td>9/8/74</td>
<td>71 (8/16)</td>
<td>66 (9/9)</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>82.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jimmy Carter</td>
<td>7/15/79</td>
<td>29 (7/13)</td>
<td>32 (8/3)</td>
<td>+3</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>55.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ronald Reagan</td>
<td>11/22/82</td>
<td>43 (11/19)</td>
<td>41 (12/10)</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George H.W. Bush</td>
<td>1/29/91</td>
<td>74 (1/26)</td>
<td>82 (1/30)</td>
<td>+8</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>67.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Clinton</td>
<td>9/11/98</td>
<td>60 (9/10)</td>
<td>63 (9/12)</td>
<td>+3</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>58.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George W. Bush</td>
<td>9/20/01</td>
<td>57 (8/16)</td>
<td>90 (9/21)</td>
<td>+33</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9/11/02</td>
<td>66 (9/5)</td>
<td>70 (9/13)</td>
<td>+4</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>53.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1/20/05</td>
<td>51 (1/14)</td>
<td>57 (2/2)</td>
<td>+6</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>63.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Averages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>51.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average: + 0.9%  (Excludes Bush 9/20/01)

religious speech led to less than a 1% increase. Arguably, this average is inflated to begin with. Ford declined 5 points in the first poll following his pardon announcement but we know that within three weeks he would actually be down 21 points. Similarly, Kennedy experienced a 3
point decline in the first poll taken after his civil rights speech in 1963, but we know that Kennedy’s own internal polls showed that he had fallen further, from 60 to 47 percent, a 13 point decline (Dallek 2003, 642). Inversely, the increase following George H.W. Bush’s 1991 State of the Union address, measured at a healthy 8%, is probably overstated. Bush received the approval of 82% of respondents on January 19, 83% of respondents on January 23, and 82% of respondents on January 30th. Taken in proper context, the 74% support he received on the 26th seems to have been an aberration, especially since Bush would not poll that low again until May 2.

The media, for the most part, responded critically to any major speech using instrumental religious rhetoric. The mean editorial score for all speeches was a slightly negative 2.63 and, on average, 51.1% of all commentaries on a speech were negative in tone, meaning they were scored a 1 or a 2 on the five point scale. Interestingly, the instances where the media was unusually positive, LBJ’s speeches after Kennedy’s death and Bush’s speech on September 20, 2001, were also the times when the president included comforting and calming religious rhetoric in his speech, in addition to instrumental religious rhetoric. The former type of religious rhetoric is broadly popular so there may be some contamination in these cases.

As obvious as it is that instrumental religious rhetoric typically fails, the experimental chapter was needed to determine why. Potentially, the answer could lie in the context in which such rhetoric has appeared. In each case study, a president used religious arguments when in crisis. It therefore was an open question whether if a president were to use instrumental religious rhetoric in more favorable circumstances, would he witness a more favorable outcome? The
experiment, mimicking the actual religious arguments presidents have historically used, resolved this puzzle. Difference of means tests provided evidence that exposure to a religious speech did not lead to a significant change in opinion on any of the five different issues that were tested. In contrast, exposure to a secular speech caused a significant opinion change on the presidential affair issue while the secular arguments were judged by respondents to be significantly stronger. Regression analysis showed that issue opinion was instead mainly driven by ideology and partisanship. Although religious rhetoric was slightly more likely to be seen as a Republican tactic, participants picked up on strong source cues in each speech that led them to see all but one of the issues as Democratic policies. With this information at hand, respondents were well positioned to screen the messages contained in each speech.

To sum up, in the very simplest manner, all that has come before: Presidents can use religious rhetoric in one of three ways: as part of a ceremonial observance, to comfort and calm the country or to achieve a political objective. Mainly for personal reasons, most presidents have hesitated to use religious rhetoric to further their goals. A crisis has been needed to help them overcome their reluctance but they have only overcome it slightly. They have restricted their use of religious rhetoric to those issues were religion is most closely identified. In the end, it does not much matter. Religious rhetoric typically does not persuade the public, the media or the Congress to support the president. Likely the reason this is so is because religious language is inherently less persuasive than secular language.

These findings have serious implications for anyone who seeks to understand presidential power or the role of religion in American politics.
Scholarly Contributions

Far from being a “political weapon,” as Domke and Coe (2008) allege, or from having the contextual power that Shogan (2006) says it has, instrumental religious rhetoric clearly does not help a president’s chances of getting what he wants. Indeed, at times the use of religious rhetoric may very well hurt the president’s chances and make success less likely, rather than more so. With the benefit of a wider perspective, this conclusion should hardly surprise anyone. Chapter three contained what was an admittedly biased selection of the research on presidential persuasion. The reason for this narrow-mindedness was made perfectly clear; I was trying only to document that it was reasonable to believe that religious rhetoric might have some credibility with the public. The truth is this positive interpretation of presidential rhetoric is a weak one to begin with. This dissertation is yet another contribution to the growing body of work that instead casts serious doubt upon the idea that the president can move America through his words alone.

Edwards (2003) has correctly noted with alarm that much of the scholarship on presidential rhetoric lacks empirical support. It is merely taken for granted by politicians, journalists and scholars that the president can favorably influence public opinion. In fact, Edwards says, the President fails most of the time in these campaigns. Statistically significant changes rarely follow televised addresses, a problem compounded by the fact that the president’s average audience size has been steadily decreasing. In one particularly compelling chapter, 18

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18 President Obama has recently begun to confront this same problem. The national address he gave on Libya was only watched by 25.6 million viewers. For comparison, the previous week’s episode of American Idol was seen by almost as many people (23.9 million). And Idol’s ratings were down that season! See http://inside.tv.ew.com/2011/03/29/obama-libya-address-ratings/ and http://www.zap2it.com/tv/ratings/zap-weekly-ratings,0,7508066.htmlstory
Edwards looks at the record of two of the most gifted presidential orators, Ronald Reagan, “the Great Communicator,” and Bill Clinton. Edwards shows how for the most part both men were unable to move public opinion in their preferred direction. Frequently the public’s evaluation of policy questions remained unchanged and often each man failed to get a bare majority of the country on his side.

Canes-Wrone (2006) has a similarly circumscribed view of the power of presidential rhetoric. Using a rational choice framework, Canes-Wrone finds that a president mostly cannot push unpopular initiatives. She shows that when a President elects to do so, he actually loses influence. Rather, presidents strategically choose to appeal to the public on issues that are already popular. In these instances, the president can capture some benefit but, in essence, Canes-Wrone is offering a very limited vision of presidential oratory; if her research is correct, the effect of a public appeal is heavily dependent on the pre-existing popularity of the proposal, which is really not much of an effect at all.

Wood (2009) makes an extremely compelling argument that presidential rhetoric actually regularly pushes the public in the absolute *opposite* direction. Wood generates a measure of “presidential issue liberalism” by coding every presidential remark about nine domestic policy issues from April 1945 through January 2005. After computing this measure, Wood is able to link it to Stimson’s (1999) well known measure of policy mood. Wood chose the nine issues to mirror Stimson’s own selections. What he is able to show is that presidential issue liberalism and the public mood do not follow each other. The only time periods in which the two trends moved together were the Ford presidency and the middle two years of the George W. Bush
presidency. Wood’s sophisticated statistical analysis confirms that this movement is systematic.

“In other words,” Wood (2009, 135) writes, “not only are presidents unsuccessful at public persuasion, but also the public reacts against presidential efforts at persuasion, whether those efforts are liberal or conservative.”

Even beyond these quantitative books, there is a collection of qualitative work, work conducted in the same spirit as the case study chapters that compose the majority of this dissertation, that reaches equally pessimistic conclusions about presidential rhetoric. Consider Tulis (1987), for instance. Tulis treats American political development as a “layered text.” The basic structural features of the U.S. system, as established by the Constitution, are constants. Rather, what has changed is our interpretation of the president’s role in that system. The public now sees it as appropriate for the president to lead, and it expects him to demonstrate skill as he does so. Yet, the old constraints do not disappear. As a consequence, the new and the old can frustrate each other. In one of the book’s cases, Tulis describes how Woodrow Wilson’s rhetorical campaign for the League of Nations failed because he had to lobby two different audiences, the public, but also the Senate, who still needed to ratify the treaty. What would persuade the Senate would not persuade the public, and vice versa. This dilemma forced him to speak in contradictory ways, undermining his credibility in the process. Kernell (1997, 25-26) agrees with the gist of Tulis’ analysis of Wilson’s rhetoric, though he prefers to assign blame for the campaign’s failure on its confrontational approach.

Finally, Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) alert their readers to a surprising downward trend of responsiveness to public opinion. Politicians, the President included, are increasingly ignoring
the public’s views in order to pursue their own personal political goals. Certain developments such as increased polarization and a rise in the incumbency advantage, among others, have made this both a possible and an attractive option. Government leaders monitor public opinion not for guidance, but instead as a means of identifying the words and themes they can use to sell their preferred policy to the public. The authors term this “crafted talk.” When it works, we see “simulated responsiveness,” where opinion and policy are indeed in alignment, but only because politicians changed opinion first.

The problem for a President, though, is that this is easier said than done. Both of the case studies in Jacobs and Shapiro’s book, Clinton’s campaign for healthcare reform and Newt Gingrich’s efforts on behalf of the Contract with America, are failures. In a way this is because, as Page and Shapiro (1992) demonstrated in earlier work, Americans’ fundamental opinions on basic issues are more or less stable and move only gradually. But also crafted talk works better for the opposition, Jacobs and Shapiro claim, who need only to raise public uncertainty about the prospect of reform in order to forestall change.

This dissertation sides with these authors- the Edwardes, the Woods, the Tulises- those men and women that are skeptical of presidential oratory, that question whether it has any impact or not. *God Wills It* is a particularly important contribution to this body of literature because it explores a specific type of rhetoric, religious rhetoric, that has been mostly overlooked to date, despite its obvious prominence in presidential leadership. And, further, the extant research argues that religious rhetoric can be extremely powerful, given certain conditions. The extensive research that supports this dissertation should replace this misguided view.
America is an unusually religious country by the standards of the modern West. A majority of people claim to read the Bible at least two times every month (Prothero 2007, 38). 54% of Americans pray daily (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 2011, 31). 91% of Americans say they believe in God (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010, 66). Given these habits, it is tempting to think that religious rhetoric might be special, that it might be different. When a president quotes the Bible or makes reference to God in an attempt to drum up support for his policies, he is drawing upon beliefs that a large portion of Americans consider to be the most important beliefs that they have. If any words can stir the public, shouldn’t it be these sacred ones? What other type of argument can we fairly compare to religious rhetoric? It is doubtful that people have the same intensity of feeling about the fiscal consequences of inflation—or anything equally less ephemeral—as they do about what God wants. Yet the reality is that even this mode of language, even religious rhetoric, falls “on dear ears,” to borrow Edwards’ apt turn of phrase. Indeed, I would like to believe that this dissertation has done for religious rhetoric, in specific, what Edwards’ book did for presidential rhetoric in general.

In the end, this dissertation points to the continued relevance of Neustadt’s (1960) understanding of presidential power. We expect a president to lead but the formal powers of the office guarantee nothing more than clerkship. A successful president must therefore use his status and authority to persuade, to bargain. Unfortunately, it does not seem that religious rhetoric will help these leaders as they persuade and bargain. Presidents are constrained, hamstrung and limited. They frequently find it difficult to act. Strategically using religious speech cannot change the fundamentals of the office.
Normative Implications

The wider public should be very interested in these findings as well. As I have said earlier, I think the governing view is that presidents can manipulate the public by means of religious rhetoric. All the quotes critical of George W. Bush that opened this dissertation were premised on that very idea. Some of Bush’s harshest critics have said as much explicitly. In a wholly over-the-top piece appearing in Presidential Studies Quarterly, Kellner (2007) assigns almost superhuman power to Bush’s religious rhetoric. Focusing in on Bush’s good vs. evil discourse, Kellner argues that Bush, working with the media, “created tremendous fear in the population, which made the public look anxiously to the government for protection, rendering the population malleable to manipulation” (627). Interchangeably, Kellner describes Bush’s rhetoric as “Orwellian,” “fascist” and an example of the “the Goebbels-Hitler strategy.” This dissertation should cause the reader to dismiss these kinds of critiques as overly naïve.

That does not mean, however, that there is no reason to be concerned about presidential religious rhetoric. If presidents cannot manipulate the public- which, assuredly, they cannot- there might be other, less visible but still deleterious consequences to worry about. Marty and Moore (2000), for instance, do not reject the premise that religion has an important role to play in public life but they do argue that it must be “handled with care.” They make a very compelling case. The two men point out how religion is inherently divisive. The adherents of a particular faith all naturally believe that they are in some way superior to the adherents of the others. They are the ones following the truth, the others are not. They are the ones with a special relationship with God, the others are not. As such, religion often hardens political
divisions. It can disrupt the public, rather than helping people to reconcile. It can be difficult to find common ground on social issues like abortion and homosexuality, Marty and Moore argue, once religious values have been introduced into the discussion. Sometimes, too, the activation of religious values can lead to violence. Over the course of American history, fanatics have frequently selectively found justification for their extremism in religious texts.

These are all good and valid observations. If religion can divide, if it can disrupt, if it can cause violence—and likely no one would disagree that it can do these things—then it also stands to reason that perhaps we ought to be quite concerned about presidential religious rhetoric. When the president talks about God, he may very well be making matters worse.

Indeed, this concern also may become more acute over time. A flurry of recent bestsellers by authors such as Christopher Hitchens (2007) and Richard Dawkins (2006) has brought greater public attention to atheism. More to the point, substantial evidence was presented in chapter twelve that documents how younger Americans are less spiritual than their parents were at a comparable point in their own life cycles. 25% of the Millennial generation chooses not to affiliate with any faith, describing themselves as “atheist,” “agnostic” or “nothing in particular.” Nearly one-in-five adults under 30 who say they were raised in a religious tradition have since left their parents’ faith. Just 33% of Millennials say they attend religious services at least once a week. Only 48% of adults under 30 say they pray daily (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010a). It seems fairly certain that the future America is a less religious America. If so, the potential that presidential religious rhetoric will alienate would likely be even higher than it is today.
There is some evidence that this may already be happening. Those outside the Abrahamic tradition (Christianity, Judaism and Islam), a growing population, are increasingly prone to feeling excluded by presidential displays of religiosity. Kurien (2006) notes that President Bush systematically overlooked Hindus, one of the fastest growing religious communities in America, in his post-9/11 religious statements. This neglect may have contributed to a burgeoning and disagreeable Hindu nationalism that publicly attacked Islam in an attempt to differentiate the two religions. Perceptively, the title of Kurien’s essay is “Mr. President, Why Do You Exclude Us From Your Prayers?”

Still, I would hazard to counter that presidents should continue to freely discuss religious beliefs in public, whether it is useful for their agenda or not. For one, chapter two cited some strong evidence that suggests that comforting and calming religious rhetoric, in particular, has some undeniable social value. By referencing religious values during moments of despair, a president could conceivably make a meaningful difference in the life of some Americans who might be struggling to cope with depression and anxiety.

Two, Americans do appear to want their president to be a religious leader. Polls regularly show that Americans think it is important that their president is a man of strong religious belief. Few citizens, outside of the media and the academy, actually had any qualms about Bush’s religious rhetoric, in particular. 52% of Americans believed that Bush mentioned his religious faith the right amount, while another 14% thought he talked about his faith too little. Just 24% believed that Bush mentioned his faith too much (Pew Forum on Religion and Public
Life 2006). By using religious rhetoric, a president fulfills the expectations the public has for his performance. It is hard to see how that would be a bad thing.

In a more abstract sense, I think we should be exceedingly cautious when it comes to any attempt to separate religious values from civic life. The great minister and public intellectual Richard John Neuhaus (1984) has written intelligently of the “naked public square”- “naked” because it has been stripped of all references to religion. Although not necessarily a fan of the rising religious fundamentalists, Neuhaus defends their political worth. Law by its very nature distinguishes right from wrong. Even if legislators deny it, by acting they are making moral judgments. This behavior is right, that behavior is wrong. So if law is to be seen as legitimate, it must be backed by morality. This truism has been recognized since as far back as Tocqueville (1990, 307), who wrote, “Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot. Religion is much more necessary in the republic which they set forth in glowing colors than in the monarchy which they attack; it is more needed in democratic republics than in any others. How is it possible that society should escape destruction if the moral tie is not strengthened in proportion as the political tie is relaxed?”

Even more insidious, however, is that Neuhaus points out how the public square cannot remain naked for long, something inevitably must take religion’s place. Throughout history, Neuhaus argues, that “something” has been the state. The Soviet Union, Hitler’s Germany, Mao’s China- these were all naked public squares. But they were also places of diminished rights and individual liberties. “Once religion is reduced to nothing more than privatized conscience, the public square has only two actors in it- the state and the individual. Religion as a
mediating structure- a community that generates and transmits moral values- is no longer available as a countervailing force to the ambitions of the state” (Neuhaus 1984, 82). Far better, isn’t it, for presidents and other political leaders to continue to expound religious beliefs and values. Pluralism- of ideas, of values, of faiths- is one of the biggest reasons why the American democratic experiment has been so successful, and will continue to be so.

The Final Word

One of the most unique features of this dissertation has been its uncommon attention to Scripture. It is rare for a work of political science to cite the Bible as much as I have. Yet it was necessary to do so if we were to truly understand what each president was trying to communicate. So being, it is only fitting to conclude with one last Biblical verse, this one from Proverbs 14: 23, “In all toil there is profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.” Words only get you so far, both in personal piety and in politics.

It may be nice to think that a president could step up to the microphone, turn on the TV cameras, and deliver an eloquent sermon that would cause Americans everywhere to bound to their feet, shouting Hallelujahs and Hosannas to the heavens. This is how the presidency works in the movies, is it not? But movies, as we all know, depict a glorified presidency, an institution of fantasy that does not exist in reality. By all means, presidents should continue to use ceremonial and comforting and calming religious rhetoric. These types of rhetoric are noncontroversial and offer valuable social benefits. However, when presidents use instrumental religious rhetoric, when they make a religious appeal for a political goal, they can likely expect
failure. The case studies have proved this, the experiment has confirmed it. And ultimately this author is left with a sad realization—perhaps I have mis-titled this dissertation.

The title is meant to call to mind Pope Urban II, who launched the First Crusade at the Council of Claremont in 1095 with the rousing call of “Deus vult!”—“God wills it!” God wills it. At the start, it seemed to me that it would be quite difficult to argue with someone who had made this kind of claim. It turns out not to be hard at all. Instead of God Wills It, I might have been better served had I titled this project God Doesn’t Will It. That, at least, would have been a fitting description of the role that presidential religious rhetoric plays in American politics.
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