Bush and God

IS PRESIDENTIAL PROFESSION OF FAITH STILL APPROPRIATE OR PRODUCTIVE?

BY CARL M. CANNON

EPA/SHAWN THEW

GOD-TALK: While Bush speaks of his faith, the nation may be dividing itself along religious lines.

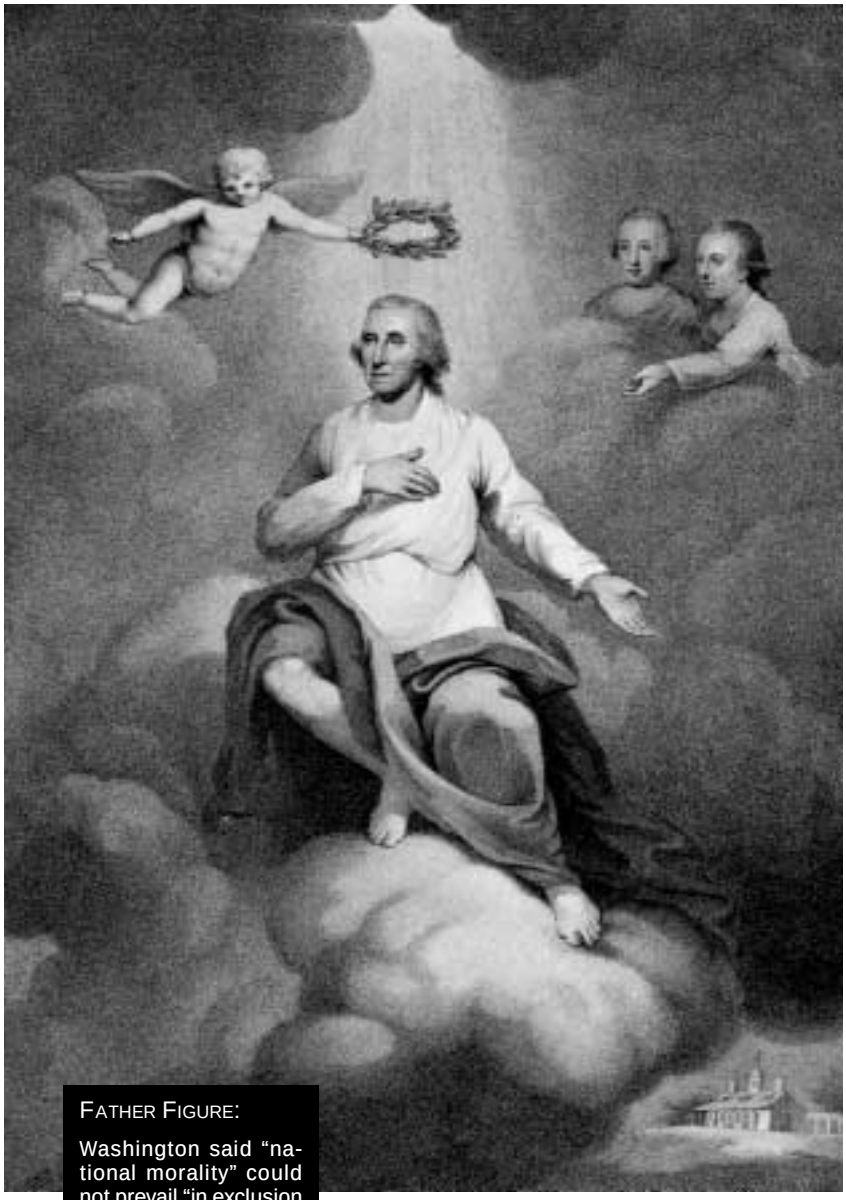
The day after Saddam Hussein's capture was announced, President Bush held a news conference at which the White House press corps attempted to divine Bush's thoughts on the significance of the event. Although clearly buoyed, Bush emphasized that while Saddam's arrest signified a great day for America, it was an even better day for Iraqis: "You've heard me say this a lot—and I say it a lot because I truly believe it—that freedom is the almighty God's gift to every person, every man and woman who lives in this world."

Normally, Bush phrases that concept this way: "The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world. It is God's gift to humanity." It is a line, rooted in the ideas set forth in the Declaration of Independence, that Bush began iterating after 9/11. But on December 15, 2003, the president spoke more directly about what he sees as God's plan on Earth. "The arrest of Saddam Hussein changed the equation in Iraq," Bush explained. "Justice was being delivered to a man who defied that gift from the Almighty to the people of Iraq."

In other words, by denying the Iraqi people their unalienable right to freedom, Saddam had been thwarting God's intentions. The logical implication of this statement is that in liberating Iraqis—and detaining Saddam—the troops of the 4th U.S. Infantry Division, their commander-in-chief, and the United States itself were instruments effecting the will of God.

Bush relayed this matter-of-factly, even somewhat

humbly. But it is not, at root, a humble thought. What Bush had done was casually express the kind of self-confidence as a leader that simultaneously enthralls his supporters and distresses his critics. Moreover, in this instance, Bush's view of his responsibilities as a civic leader also encompassed his theology—and what he understands to be his duties as a Christian. But Bush was entering perilous territory for a president.



ART RESOURCE/NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

FATHER FIGURE: Washington said "national morality" could not prevail "in exclusion of religious principle."

A CHANGE OF HEART

Arguments about Bush's religiousness began on the presidential campaign trail. Asked in December 1999 during a Republican primary debate which "political philosopher or thinker" he most identified with, then-Gov. Bush replied abruptly, "Christ—because he changed my heart."

GOP candidates Orrin Hatch and Gary Bauer immediately followed suit by also invoking Jesus's name. But Bush was the acknowledged front-runner for the nomination, and it was his answer that reignited a familiar debate about the role of religion in American politics.

For evangelical Christians, Bush's testimony was an electric moment. Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, was watching at home. In the room with him were his wife and daughter, neither of whom is terribly interested in politics. But when they heard Bush's answer, both stopped what they were doing and said, "Wow!" They were not alone. "Most evangelicals who heard that question probably thought, 'That's exactly the way I would have answered that,' " Land said.

But among many other Americans, Bush's comment engendered resentment and worry. "I felt left out, and I think a lot of Americans felt left out," said Abraham Foxman, director of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and a leader in the American Jewish community. "It was a disconcerting inclusion of religion into politics."

Many prominent mainline Christians in Iowa agreed. C. Christopher Epting, the Episcopal bishop in Des Moines, told political reporters he considered Bush's answer "a turnoff." Bush's answer, Epting added, suggested that a Bush victory would result in "a heavy-handed Christianity in the White House."

Speaking for cynics everywhere, *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd wrote, "W. is checking Jesus's numbers, and Jesus is polling well in Iowa." Dowd prefaced her criticism by noting her own Catholicism; her cynicism was directed at politicians, not at religion. And like many critics, Dowd didn't spare Al Gore. Earlier in the campaign, the Democratic nominee had volunteered that his guiding political principle as president would be "WWJD"—Christian-youth-group-speak for "What would Jesus do?" Observed Dowd tartly: "Christ, the new wedge issue."

That wedge could actually be real. As the 2004 election year begins, new polls show that the nation may be in the process of dividing itself along religious lines. Meanwhile, Bush's professed faith—and his critics' response to it—raises three fundamental questions. First, is there precedent for an American president publicly speaking about God the way Bush does? Second, do Americans believe Bush's faith to be genuine? Finally, has the nation become so pluralistic—and the world so interconnected—that any presidential God-talk is inappropriate, and even counterproductive?

PRESIDENTIAL PULPITS

The short answer to the question of whether George W. Bush's predecessors expressed their faith publicly and

referred to God in official pronouncements is yes. But they did so in a stylized, generic way—with great care. The question for Bush is whether he exercises the same delicacy.

As president, George Washington signed the first Thanksgiving proclamation, decreeing that November 26 "be devoted by the people of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being who is the beneficent author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be; that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people of this country previous to their becoming a nation."

In his Farewell Address, Washington wrote that "of the dispositions" that lead to political prosperity, morality is the most indispensable, adding that "both reason and experience forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

Even earlier, as the nation was being formed, its rebellious leaders invoked the help of the Almighty. In adopting the Declaration of Independence, drafted by future president Thomas Jefferson, the men of 1776 signed a document asserting that men are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." Two years earlier, Jefferson had written, "The God who gave us life, gave us liberty at the same time." Modern conservatives, citing such language, maintain that even early free-thinkers such as Jefferson and James Madison would be baffled by the insistence of today's civil-liberties groups on a fundamentalist brand of secularism that bans statues of the baby Jesus from town squares at Christmastime.

Perhaps they are right. But liberals also cite Jefferson in making their case. After all, this is the man who, as president, penned a famous letter to the Baptists of Danbury, Conn., outlining the necessity of "building a wall of separation between church and state." And Jefferson's musings on religion show ambivalence not just toward organized religion but toward Christianity itself.

Two hundred years before Bush did so, Jefferson also cited Jesus as the most influential political philosopher or thinker. But the Sage of Monticello did so in a way that would render most modern American politicians unelectable to national office. Suggesting that Jesus's teachings were the underpinnings of democracy, Jefferson concluded that the emphasis on Jesus's divinity was a distraction from the teachings of the man whose "system of morality was the most benevolent and sublime probably that has ever been taught, and consequently more perfect than those of any of the ancient philosophers." The result was a quirky, little-known book that scholars call the Jefferson Bible and that Jefferson titled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth: Extracted Textually From the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French, and English*. It is a chronological narrative of Jesus's life, cut and pasted from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—but with most of the miracles, beginning with the virgin birth, conspicuously absent.

But if Jefferson edited the Apostles, Jefferson's colleagues edited him.

The Declaration of Independence contains four references to a Supreme Being, but only one of them was originally penned by Jefferson. His early draft does not posit that unalienable rights come from a "Creator," but rather that "all men are created equal … that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable." Furthermore, in the final version of the Declaration, a "Supreme Judge of the World" makes an appearance. The phrase "the protection of Divine Providence" also appears. Both were inserted by the Continental Congress.

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JIMMY CARTER: As president, he consulted the Bible nightly; Bush has also said he reads it regularly.

This was the first, but not the last, time that Congress displayed such pious impulses. During the Civil War, it was Congress that put the words "In God We Trust" on the nation's coins (1864). During the Cold War, Congress decided that what was good enough for coins was good enough for the Pledge of Allegiance (1954) and for paper currency (1955); and it also made those words the official motto of the United States (1956).

It was in this era, the 1950s, that Jewish theologian Will Herberg defined the public theology extant in the United States as the nation's "civic faith" or "the civil religion of the American way of life."

By then, the tradition started by Jefferson, and perfected by Lincoln, was firmly established: It was a tradition of American presidents who, regardless of the relative strength of their private faith, freely employed the rhetorical imagery of the Bible, generally the New Testament, in invoking God's aid and blessings for the nation—but not in a way that chose sides among denominations—or among Americans themselves.

The utilitarian political purpose of such ecumenism is obvious. "It does not become America that within her borders, where every man is free to follow the dictates of his conscience, men should raise the cry of church against church" is the way Woodrow Wilson put it in a 1915 speech. "To do that is to strike at the very spirit and heart of America."

Presidents tend to strike the same tone privately as well. In the year he made those remarks, Wilson wrote to a friend that his life "would not be worth living" were it not for the "driving power of religion, for *faith*, pure and simple." He goes on to say that he feels sorry for those who lack such faith, but never exactly gets around to saying what it is they should believe in. It's as if, for presidents, all faiths are created equal.

George W. Bush operates very much in this tradition. He recently touched off a minor controversy by offering his opinion that Muslims "worship the same God" as Christians. The same evangelists who swooned over Bush's "changed my heart" remark in the 2000 campaign took Bush to task for this assertion—but the current president was keeping faith with his predecessors.

In a handwritten manuscript found at his desk after he died, Harry Truman put it this way: "Jews, Mohammedans, Buddhists, and Confucians worship the same God as the Christians say they do. He is all seeing, all hearing, and all knowing."

In this historical context, it is not immediately apparent why Bush should inspire such intense reactions among his critics. Bush has spoken publicly of being "on bended knee" in prayer. So did Wilson. Bush said he consults the Bible regularly. Jimmy Carter did it nightly. In a speech to the troops on the eve of the invasion of Iraq, Bush asked for God's blessing on the enterprise. Franklin D. Roosevelt, who once instructed a speechwriter to make sure to include "the God stuff," led the entire nation in prayer on the occasion of D-Day. Bush seems to find God's hand in the war he is waging; Lincoln told his Cabinet that he considered the victory at Antietam a sign from the Almighty telling him to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. Bush addresses the National Prayer Breakfast each year (and has added the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast), but so has every president since Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Bush did not, as Ike did, begin his first Inaugural Address by pulling out of his pocket a prayer he'd written and asking the audience to bow their heads while he read it. The ecumenism of Ike's eccentric prayer extended to those in the nation "who hold to differing political faiths" as well as differing religious faiths, thereby granting an almost secular air to the very act of praying.

But World War II was different from the Cold War, and in the 1950s a few agnostics surfaced to take issue with the God-talk coming from a five-star-general-turned-president who, as far as anyone knew, wasn't even a churchgoer. The most talented of these skeptics was a young writer for *The Reporter* named William Lee Miller. In a series of articles that he turned into a book called *Pieties Along the Potomac*, Miller wondered aloud whether "the president's constant 'moral' language may be partly a substitute for a developed social philosophy."

If one scrubs the overheated passion from the rhetoric of those who object to Bush's religiosity, this is also the most salient criticism they are leveling at the current occupant of the White House.

A Charge to Keep

The outlines of Bush's come-to-Jesus progression are well known, if unspectacular. The story lacks drama, as well as animating detail, because Bush himself has purposely told it in a way to deflect attention. The basic facts, as he relates them, are these:

Bush on Faith

"I'm not all that comfortable describing my faith, because in the political world, there are a lot of people who say, 'Vote for me; I'm more religious than my opponent.' And those kind of folks make me a little nervous." *—from December 6, 1999, interview with* U.S. News and World Report

"I don't pray for votes. I don't pray for the stock market to go up. I pray for strength and patience and love and understanding." *—from July 28, 2000, interview with Barbara Walters*

"You can be a sinner and live under a bridge. Or you can be a sinner and be the governor of Texas. To me, it is an understanding that the human condition requires a power greater than self. In 1986, I came to that realization. I had been raised a Christian, but my faith was reconfirmed in a much more powerful, personal way—because I sought, and I found." *—from August 29, 2000, interview with* Charisma *Magazine*

"I believe in tolerance, not in spite of my faith, but because of it. I believe in a God who calls us, not to judge our neighbors, but to love them. I believe in grace, because I have seen it … in peace, because I have felt it … in forgiveness, because I have needed it." *—from Republican National Convention acceptance speech, August 3, 2000*

"A genuine philosophy reflects the experiences of a person. And in my case, I was raised a Christian, recommitted myself to Christ. Got into the Bible. My life changed in many ways. An outward manifestation is, I quit drinking.… If you believe that we're all sinners—as opposed to 'you're a sinner and I'm not'—then I think it helps you, at least for me. It's made me a better governor. It helps bring people together, and that's what is needed on some very practical issues that the country faces." *—from response when asked by Beliefnet editor Steven Waldman in October 2000 how much his personal faith shaped his belief in "compassionate conservatism."*

"[The decision to go to war in Iraq] is a decision I made based upon what I thought were the best interests of the American people. I was able to step back from religion, because I have a job to do. And I, on bended knee to the good Lord, asked him to help me to do my job in a way that's wise." *—from interview with NBC's Tom Brokaw in late April, 2003*

Bush had always been a believer, but the kind who spent time thinking about the implications of that belief mostly on Sundays, while in church. He began to question his priorities after he married Laura, especially in relation to his heavy drinking. Then, one weekend in the summer of 1985, evangelist Billy Graham visited the Bush family compound in Kennebunkport, Maine. Bush heard Graham preach in a small summer church, St. Ann's by the Sea, and was impressed. Bush's father, perhaps sensing what educators call "a teachable moment," asked Graham to answer questions for his family members one night by the fire. The next day, the younger Bush and Graham went for a walk.

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IKE AND BILLY GRAHAM: The evangelist would later play a role in changing George W. Bush's attitude toward faith.

"What he said sparked a change in my heart," Bush related later in his autobiography. "Rev. Graham planted a mustard seed in my soul, a seed that grew over the next year. He led me to the path, and I began walking. It was the beginning of a change in my life. I had always been a 'religious' person, had regularly attended church, even taught Sunday school and served as an altar boy. But that weekend, my faith took on a new meaning."

Bush has not, in the ensuing years, referred to himself as "born again," explaining that, to him, this connotes a particular moment, while he sees himself as being on a journey. Nor does he use the word "evangelical," which he has suggested implies a duty to proselytize that would be inappropriate for a public officeholder. Instead, Bush says that his faith was "reconfirmed" or that he experienced a "renewal of faith."

This renewal led him to daily prayer, and to regular attendance at an evangelical church in Midland, Texas, including Bible fellowship classes with a group of men—even though that meant giving up *Monday Night Football*. Bush has often pointed to his overcoming of his drinking problem as an outward and visible sign of his inward spiritual grace. Yet, in keeping with the fundamentalist creed, he stresses that he knows he is still a sinner.

"Bush … represents the typical Southern style of Protestantism that focuses on religion of the heart, not the head," says Texas Tech University history professor Mark Stoll, who adds that Bush's theology is reflected in a bumper sticker Stoll once saw in Lubbock: "Jesus: Saving the World One Soul at a Time."

"Bush comes out of that small-group evangelical movement that is popular in Texas, a kind of evangelical, therapeutic religiosity," explains Michael Cromartie, vice president of the Washington-based Ethics and Public Policy Center. The president, he says, lacks "an elaborate, worked-out public" Christian philosophy. "Instead, it's a personal story to tell—how God changed his life. It's like the hymn 'Amazing Grace.' Think of those words: 'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.' That's how Bush approaches it. I know the Left hates this, but it's true. He thinks of himself as a lowly sinner."

To those unfamiliar with this tradition of Protestant thought, the image seems at odds with Bush's public persona as a somewhat cocky fellow. But evangelical Christians—and nearly 40 percent of Americans describe themselves as such—understand this language. Christ died for my sins, Bush says; Christ has a plan for my life.

Generally speaking, neither Bush's supporters nor his critics doubt the sincerity of his conversion. As Cromartie says, many liberals detest Bush's religiosity—but it's not because they think he's a phony. Marvin Olasky, the University of Texas professor who has been so influential in Bush's career, suggests that in registering such complaints, Bush's critics are paying him a backhanded, even unintentional, compliment: They are conceding the genuineness of his faith. "With some other presidents, maybe this stuff is written off as being just political talk," said Olasky, the author of *Compassionate Conservatism*. "The fear [of Bush's critics] is that he is *not* being a hypocrite."

Liberal author Joan Didion recently explored the reaches of Christian fundamentalism (especially the belief in the Rapture, the day when evangelical Christians believe they will instantly ascend to meet God) as a way of insisting that it is Bush's very belief in such stuff that makes him a menace. "There are obvious problems, made manifest over the past two years, in letting this kind of personality loose on the fragile web of unseen alliances and unspoken enmities that constitutes any powerful nation's map of the world," she writes. "The fundamentalist approach to information, whether that approach is innate or learned, does not encourage nuanced judgments."

Long before Bush came on the scene, the Left learned to associate the Christian Right with a series of public policy issues—opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage; support for capital punishment, school vouchers, school prayer—on which liberals fundamentally disagree. Bush hasn't worked

overtime on the conservatives' social agenda, and he has tended to keep such polarizing preachers as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson at a respectable remove from the Oval Office, but he is what he is.

In mid-December, Bush told ABC's Diane Sawyer that although he is a "tolerant" and "understanding" person, he will, "if necessary," support a constitutional amendment codifying the proposition that marriage should be between a man and a woman. "President Bush is trying to have it both ways," responds People for the American Way President Ralph G. Neas, who says that Bush's religion-based viewpoint is neither tolerant nor understanding.

So Bush is not an imposter, his critics are saying, but he does adhere to a religious philosophy they associate with regressive social views. For his part, Bush knows what liberal intellectuals think of him and his faith, and he thinks they are wrong. He is not alone. In *Jerusalem and Athens*, theologian Cornelius Van Til explores two traditions, one biblical and the other academic. Both traditions handed learning down through the ages in Western society. "Lincoln could draw on both traditions, because during his time Americans knew the Bible and understood it to be the source of great wisdom," says Olasky. "Bush does, too, but today most academics only take their learning from Athens. If you do something different, it's threatening. It's fundamentally scary to them. It's one reason they don't like him. They say that he's stupid or uneducated, and he knows they say that. But what he's implicitly saying back to these [intellectuals] is, 'You consider yourselves supremely educated, but you've missed out on this whole other source of knowledge.' "

AP PHOTO

JOHN F. KENNEDY:
He overcame religious prejudice to become the first Roman Catholic U.S. president.

MODERN CRUSADER

As if on cue, at a prestigious presidential conference at Princeton University this year, some of the tenured professors in attendance openly ridiculed Bush's Christian faith. This is not something that would have happened in Jefferson's day, or Lincoln's, or when Woodrow Wilson, the devout Presbyterian, was president of that great university, or even in 1961 when John F. Kennedy overcame religious prejudice to become the first Roman Catholic president of the United States.

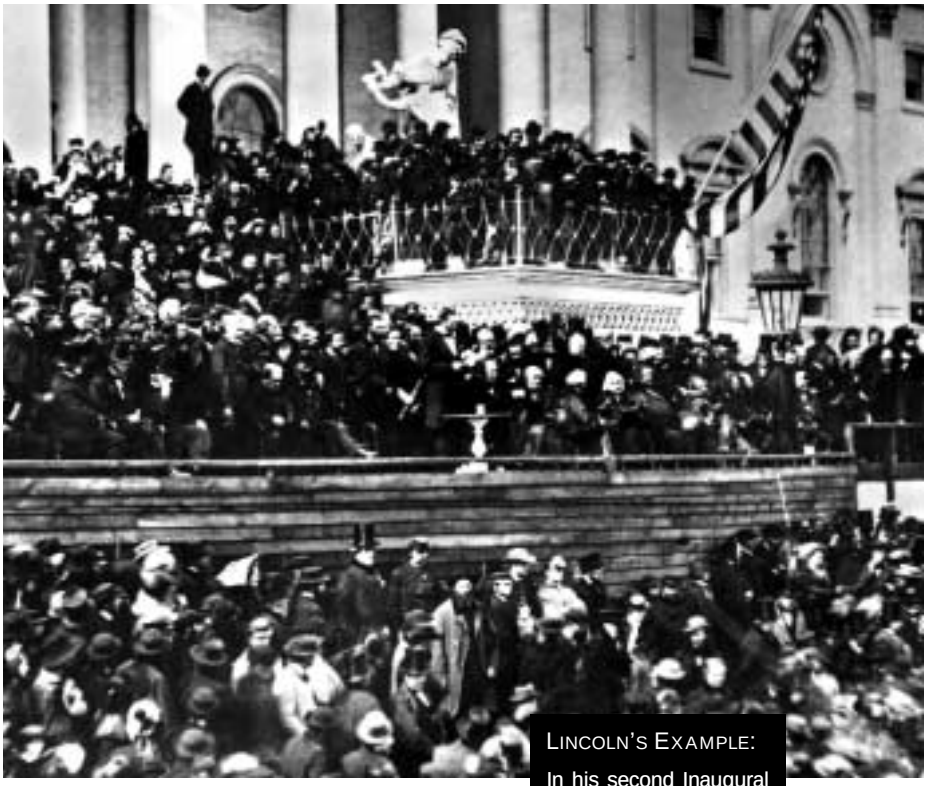
But these professors were reflecting a growing and significant political phenomenon: Church attendance has become a virtual fault line between Republicans and Democrats. According to a November poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, voters who regularly attend religious services support Bush by 63 percent to 37 percent, while those who rarely or never attend lean against him, 62 percent to 38 percent. (These numbers would be even starker except for African-Americans, who report high churchgoing rates but are almost monolithically Democratic.) The upshot is that the typical white Howard Dean voter does not attend church. The typical Bush voter does.

"We now have the widest gap we have ever had between Republicans and Democrats" on church attendance, reports Andy Kohut, the director of the Pew survey.

There is a faith gap between America's elites and the general electorate as well—one that helps explain the skeptical tone of much of the news coverage of Bush's religion. Texas writer Molly Ivins may sense "this odd, personal religiosity about Bush," but most of the public does not agree: Last summer, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life turned up stark poll numbers to illustrate this point. Asked if "Bush's religious beliefs affect policy too little, too much, or just the right amount," a solid majority (58 percent) said Bush's religious tone was just right. But among those who weren't in that group, twice as many people (21 percent) said Bush's religious beliefs affected policy *too little* as said it was too much (10 percent).

Many people would say, then, that this should be the end of the argument. If Bush's faith is authentic, if there is ample evidence in the historical record showing that previous presidents have talked just like Bush, and if a vast majority of Americans approve, there wouldn't seem to be a problem. But it's not that simple, and one reason it isn't is the war that Bush is leading. Although Bush prefers to call it the war on terror, it is also a war against religious fanaticism.

The most definitive weapon in the war against the Islamicists, however, is not the American military. It's the American way of life, which includes not only charity, but pluralism. Bush himself has acknowledged as much. That's why there is something discordant when, at the beginning of this war, a White House speechwriter who happens to be



BETTMANN/CORBIS/MATTHEW BRADY PHOTO BY ALEXANDER GARDENER

LINCOLN'S EXAMPLE: In his second Inaugural Address, Lincoln was careful not to claim knowledge of God's plan.

Jewish, David Frum, is made to feel like an outsider when his colleagues chide one another for missing "Bible study"—classes he was never invited to join. It's also why, when Bush initially used the word "crusade" to describe this war, within hours he was being denounced in the Muslim portion of the electronic global village on the grounds that he was somehow harking back to the Crusades.

Such are the hurdles for a religion-talking president. To overcome them, Bush must avoid sounding, as he did once when governor of Texas, as though he thinks that only those who believe as he does can go to heaven. And when discussing God, he must avoid alienating Jews, Muslims, Hindus, traditional Catholics, and mainline Protestants—to say nothing of nonbelievers. He must also—and for Bush this seems the most difficult of all—avoid sounding as though he is appropriating God for his own purposes.

When he sounds this way in the context of the war, Bush "plays to Osama bin Laden's strong suit," Harvard Divinity School professor David Little said early last year. "It's [bin Laden's] morals against ours, or his God against ours, which is exactly what you don't want to get in a position of saying."

Most days, Bush gets this. He hasn't repeated the use of the word "crusade," and he's paid close attention to symbols and gestures that could be misinterpreted—even to the point of forgoing services at St. John's Church on Sunday, December 14, so that the first images of the president after Saddam's capture weren't of Bush in a Christian place of worship. And if one overlooks the obligatory "God Bless America" that punctuates Bush's public remarks, the vast majority of his speeches as president have been secular from start to finish. Furthermore, when Bush has mentioned God, he has generally done so in the neutral phrasings that fall within the bounds of America's "civil religion."

In his Inaugural Address, for instance, Bush said that the need for Americans to show compassion to one another is the work of an entire nation, not just its government. "Some needs and hurts are so deep they will only respond to a mentor's touch or a pastor's prayer," he added. "Church and charity, synagogue and mosque lend our communities their humanity, and they will have an honored place in our plans and in our laws."

An impression exists that after 9/11, Bush started drawing sharper theological lines. Perhaps this is true, but even before the attacks, Bush had taken to suggesting to audiences that one way they could be patriotic Americans was to practice the Golden Rule. He may have increased the urgency of this call after the attacks, but the tone of Bush's religiosity remained consistently generic. In early 2002, on a trip to Winston-Salem, N.C., Bush told the crowd that the military was one weapon to use against the dark forces loose in the world, but not the only one.

"At home, you fight evil with acts of goodness," Bush said. "It's the … momentum of a million acts of kindness.… If people want to fight terror, do something kind for a neighbor. Join the USA Freedom Corps. Love somebody. Mentor a child. Stand up to evil with acts of goodness and kindness."

Bush began that year the way he ended it, proclaiming in his 2003 State of the Union speech that "the liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world. It is God's gift to humanity." In an address drafted by Bush's chief speechwriter, Michael Gerson, an evangelical Christian and a student of Lincoln, Bush went on to say, "We do not claim to know all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life, and all of history.… Events aren't moved by blind change and chance … [but] by the hand of a just and faithful God."

This is an attempt to clear a very high bar, one that William Lee Miller, who went on to become a distinguished presidential scholar, notes was set by Lincoln himself. Whether Bush and Gerson, who concedes that "we try not to claim insight into the mind of the Divine," have cleared it is in the eye of the beholder. But it is worth remembering that in his second Inaugural Address, Lincoln made no serene predictions about the future. The 16th president invoked a dozen biblical images and phrasings, but he was careful not to sound proprietary or even to claim inside knowledge about God's plan. Each side in the Civil War read the same Bible and prayed to the same God, Lincoln observed, and the prayers of both could not be answered. And why had the scourge of war lasted so long? Because "the Almighty has his own purposes." ■

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