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Thought of the week

"This is not who we are. I'd be glad if they left. I might even pay the bus fare for them." — University of Oklahoma President David Boren on members of a fraternity house who were caught on tape chanting a racist chant that included a racial slur and referenced lynching

Does the faith of a president matter?

Last month we celebrated the birthdays of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, two presidents whose deep but somewhat unconventional faith has evoked great debate. Does the faith of presidents truly matter? Does it significantly affect how they think, live, and govern? Concluding that it does not, most biographers have treated presidents' religious convictions as no more important than hobbies such as collecting stamps or playing golf. Many other Americans, however, have considered the faith of presidents as either a cause for celebration or alarm. While Christians often campaigned vigorously and voted in droves for candidates who shared their faith, their foes warned that the dangerous religious views of other presidential aspirants made them unacceptable for the nation's highest office.

In the presidential campaign of 1800, Federalists denounced Thomas Jefferson as an infidel who would subvert the nation's Christian foundation. Rumors spread that, if elected, Jefferson would use public funds to entice civil servants, teachers, military officers, and even ministers to either ignore religion or teach secularism. After Jefferson won, these claims prompted many Federalists in New England to bury their Bibles in their gardens so that his administration could not destroy them.

In 1908, Theodore Roosevelt assured apprehensive prospective voters that William Taft's Unitarian faith did not disqualify him from being president. Twenty years later, fundamentalist Protestants argued that Democratic candidate Al Smith's Catholicism made him unfit to be president. Despite John F. Kennedy's assurances that he would be guided by the Constitution and his conscience, not the pope, his Catholic faith was as controversial in 1960 as Smith's had been in 1928.

Jimmy Carter's affirmation that he was born again baffled and frightened many Americans as did George W. Bush's assertion that Jesus was his favorite philosopher. Many worried that their decisions would be based on what they perceived God wanted them to do rather than on the advice of their cabinet and the nation's strategic needs.

Are these concerns justified? Does the faith of presidents truly affect how they govern? Does it help shape their perspectives, policies, actions, and decisions? The answer depends on which chief executives we are discussing. The faith of some presidents (such as Kennedy ironically) mattered little. The faith of many others, including Hoover, Carter, Bush, and surprisingly Jefferson, strongly influenced their political philosophy and policies.

Although it is impossible to disentangle the personal religious convictions of presidents from their use of religion to serve partisan political purposes, many of them were more deeply religious and had more vibrant personal devotional lives than most scholars have recognized. Presidents use religious language and engage in religious practices to win public approval and gain political advantages. Therefore, we must judge whether their faith is authentic by examining their private correspondence as well as their public pronouncements and evaluating the testimonies of those who knew them best. We must also assess their statements and behavior before, during, and after their presidencies.

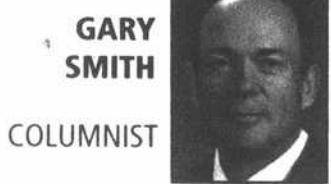
Their religious practices—frequent church attendance, prayer, and reading of the Bible—close relationships with some religious groups, regular use of religious rhetoric, and particular policies all testify that their faith was important to many chief executives. Most presidents have worshipped consistently to continue their life-long practice, seek divine guidance, set a good example, or to please prospective voters. Almost all presidents have extensively used moral and biblical language to console grieving Americans, provide assurance in times of crisis, celebrate religious holidays, and promote particular policies.

The faith of many presidents has also helped shape their policies and determine their decisions. Numerous other factors—strategic considerations, national security, party platform commitments, campaign promises, political philosophy, relationships, and reelection concerns—affect their decisions. Nevertheless, their religious commitments have strongly affected the policies many presidents adopted. Religious beliefs helped inspire George Washington's quest to guarantee religious liberty, Jefferson's to ensure peace, and Abraham Lincoln's to end slavery. Their Christian convictions helped prompt William McKinley to declare war against Spain and take control of the Philippines, Theodore Roosevelt to establish national parks, Woodrow Wilson to devise the Treaty of Versailles, Herbert Hoover to reform prisons, and Franklin Roosevelt to remedy the ills of the Great Depression. Harry Truman's decision to recognize Israel, Dwight Eisenhower's attempt to reduce armaments, Carter's quest to promote human rights, Ronald Reagan's crusade to crush communism, Bill Clinton's efforts to resolve international conflicts, George W. Bush's support for faith-based initiatives, and Barack Obama's policies on poverty were all motivated in large part by their faith.

Has the faith of presidents affected them and their administrations positively or negatively? The answer to this question depends largely on how individuals view the religious convictions and policies of particular presidents. However, when people's faith gives them confidence, assurance, comfort, and inspiration, it is generally beneficial. People's faith often stimulates them to be more compassionate, generous, and hopeful and supplies a constructive blueprint for bettering society. Moreover, the faith of presidents has often greatly aided them in carrying out their demanding duties and serving as the nation's pastor-in-chief during crises and calamities.

Faith has played a very important and often controversial role in the lives of American presidents from George Washington to Barack Obama. Although the founders wisely separated church and state, religious belief and politics have often been inextricably joined and will undoubtedly continue to be.

Gary Smith is a fellow for Faith and Politics at the Center for Vision and Values.



GARY SMITH  
COLUMNIST



Learning to be a citizen

The question usually comes toward the end of a public meeting. Some knotty problem is being discussed, and someone in the audience will raise his or her hand and ask, "Okay, so what can I do about it?"

I love that question. Not because I've ever answered it to my satisfaction, but because it bespeaks such a constructive outlook. Democracy is no spectator sport and citizens are not passive consumers. I'm always invigorated by running into people who understand this. But that doesn't make answering the question any easier.

The usual advice that politicians give is to vote, work for a candidate, let your elected officials know what you think, join an organization of like-minded citizens, and participate in community life. This is good counsel — but only as far as it goes. With a little more time now to answer the question, I'd add a few points.

First, it's important that citizens appreciate how hard it is to solve problems in a representative democracy. Every issue — even a stop sign at a corner — is more complex than it appears. The best way to learn this is to become an expert on a single topic. You can't study every issue, but you can pick one and dig in, whether it's a big problem like climate change or a smaller one, such as how to get food delivered to shut-ins in your community.

Understanding and appreciating all aspects of the issue is the best way to see how and where you can make progress. It also makes you more patient with others — includ-

ing elected officials — who are trying to resolve other thorny challenges.

LEE HAMILTON  
COLUMNIST



It's also vital to learn that solving problems means working together with all kinds of people. It requires bringing different points of view together, developing connections to key players in your community, talking face-to-face with others who may not agree with you, and communicating your ideas effectively — including to the media. This is the surest way I know to understand differences, and to learn that these differences can exist without personal animosity. That, in turn, is a key step toward recognizing the common ground on which you can build agreement.

Many of the people I know who answered the call of citizenship did so to resolve a specific issue: getting the railroad signal at a crossing to work; improving food labeling so diabetics could know how much sugar packaged food contains; improving a watershed to help a community manage its water supply. Sometimes, people want to address a situation they don't like — what they consider to be over-spending, or a politician whose priorities they disagree with. Sometimes they just want to contribute to the direction and success of their community.

There is a key lesson that comes from trying to solve a particular problem: it tends to make you less

ideological and more pragmatic. It forces you to examine the options in front of you and the resources at hand to help you pursue them. You have to judge whether a given option can gather sufficient support in the community to go forward, and reality that you can't solve everything; sometimes you have to put particular problems aside and come back to them another day, when circumstances have shifted.

There are plenty of people who find all this frustrating and give up. Many others devote their lives to it, whether as community participants, engaged activists, or public servants. Politics is not a game for everyone, and there are many other ways to be involved in community life. Regardless of the avenue they choose, it's the people who step forward who refresh this country and make it stronger.

Our Constitution's preamble begins, "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union..." At heart, that's what getting involved means: shouldering the challenges, sharing responsibilities and opportunities that democracy thrusts upon us as we pursue a more perfect union. That's what I want to say to the people who ask, "What can I do about it?" The journey is hard and complicated, but it's immensely satisfying. Few rewards can match your satisfaction when your fellow citizens thank you for a job well done.

Lee Hamilton is Director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years.

Repentance is the key

Dear Editor,

"The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is Longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

As we begin the Lenten Season once again the word repentance comes into view. I believe we live in a society that would ask, 'Why should I repent?' I'm basically a good person.' We turn to Scripture and see very clearly that John the Baptist's message was to "repent" and even the message that Jesus came preaching was: "Do we think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans... but I tell you no, but unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:2-3).

As individuals are we any better

than anyone else? Do our words and actions reflect the loving and forgiving nature of Christ, or do we continually "see the speck in someone else's eye and fail to see the log in our own eye?" (Matthew 7:3).

When God looks at what is going on in our communities, this nation, and the world, what else could he say but "Repent!"

If we study the book of Revelation we quickly see that when the continual warnings that have been given fail and don't seem to have any affect, then something more drastic will occur and hopefully turn people around and to do as God says; to repent.

Are we listening to "What the Spirit is saying to the churches?" (Revelation 2 and 3).

In these last days we need to be attentive to what God is saying and

to avoid what the clamoring voices all around us are saying. God again is saying as He has always said, for "God's people to humble themselves and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Could it be that the Holy Spirit is saying to the churches, our communities, our nation and our world to either humble themselves or be humbled? The choice becomes ours. Take time to listen and hear what the Holy Spirit is saying in these troubling times.

WARREN STACKHOUSE  
Edenton  
Editor's note: The author is pastor of River of Life, a Family of Faith.

Wind generation fraught with problems

Dear Editor,

If you research commercial wind generation online you will quickly learn that this activity is fraught with serious problems and would not even be considered for Chowan County without the numerous government tax credits, subsidies and alternative energy mandates.

Wind is not economically viable and European governments that in the past enthusiastically promoted wind energy are now backing off. Unless a way can be found to store the energy created by wind, existing fossil fuel power plants must be kept in operation to fill in for the time that wind is absent and these same plants must be taken off line when winds are high and the de-

mand for electricity is low—an inefficient and uneconomical way to run an electricity grid. The higher costs are ultimately borne by you and me while companies like Apex profit handsomely. However, our politicians have decreed we WILL have wind, and it IS coming to Chowan. Each turbine will generate \$5000+ per year in leases; landowners can't be faulted for wanting to cash in, but the process that Apex uses to recruit local political support for wind is designed to be as opaque as possible while they woo those who can approve the permits.

Chowan County citizens need reasonable protection from the documented ill effects of wind tur-

bines (if you haven't heard of infrasound, look it up.) An arbitrary 30-day period to review the ordinance is shortsighted. Would the same timeframe be applied to a projected nuclear or coal power plant?

It appears to me that political considerations are driving this rather than the public good. Since no wind generation company has so far filed for permits, why not take the time to do the proper homework? It is likely there are many suitable locations in Chowan where wind turbines can coexist with their neighbors—vet those locations.

JOHN SAMS  
Edenton