

Significant Prayer Event #7 D-DAY JUNE 6, 1944

Saul remained at Gilgal, and all the troops with him were quaking with fear. 8 He waited seven days, the time set by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and Saul's men began to scatter. 9 So he said, "Bring me the burnt offering and the fellowship offerings." And Saul offered up the burnt offering. 10 Just as he finished making the offering, Samuel arrived, and Saul went out to greet him.

11 "What have you done?" asked Samuel.

Saul replied, "When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Micmash, 12 I thought, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the LORD's favor.' So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering."

13 "You acted foolishly," Samuel said. "You have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. 14 But now your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command." 1 Samuel 13:7-14

22 Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in front of the whole assembly of Israel, spread out his hands toward heaven 23 and said:

"O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below—you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way.

27 "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! 28 Yet give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy, O LORD my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in your presence this day. 29 May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, 'My Name shall be there,' so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place. 30 Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive 1 Kings 8:22,23,27-30

Dear Ones,

If the influence of a prayer could be measured by the number of people joined in praying the same words, then this would easily be the single most significant prayer moment in U.S. History. On the evening of June 6, 1944, the President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, went on the radio and led the nation in a prayer which he and his speechwriter, Robert Sherwood, had prepared and had widely published and distributed. Pollsters estimated that one hundred million Americans tuned in to the broadcast and joined their hearts to the President as he read the following words.



Fellow Americans: Last night, when I spoke with you about the fall of Rome, I knew at that moment that troops of the United States and our allies were crossing the Channel in another and greater operation. It has come to pass with success thus far. And so, in this poignant hour, I ask you to join with me in prayer:

Almighty God: Our sons, pride of our Nation, this day have set upon a mighty endeavor, a struggle to preserve our Republic, our religion, and our civilization, and to set free a suffering humanity.

Lead them straight and true; give strength to their arms, stoutness to their hearts, steadfastness in their faith.

They will need Thy blessings. Their road will be long and hard. For the enemy is strong. He may hurl back our forces. Success may not come with rushing speed, but we shall return again and again; and we know that by Thy grace, and by the righteousness of our cause, our sons will triumph.

They will be sore tried, by night and by day, without rest-until the victory is won. The darkness will be rent by noise and flame. Men's souls will be shaken with the violences of war.

For these men are lately drawn from the ways of peace. They fight not for the lust of conquest. They fight to end conquest. They fight to liberate. They fight to let justice arise, and tolerance and good will among all Thy people. They yearn but for the end of battle, for their return to the haven of home.

Some will never return. Embrace these, Father, and receive them, Thy heroic servants, into Thy kingdom.

And for us at home -- fathers, mothers, children, wives, sisters, and brothers of brave men overseas -- whose thoughts and prayers are ever with them--help us, Almighty God, to rededicate ourselves in renewed faith in Thee in this hour of great sacrifice. Many people have urged that I call the Nation into a single day of special prayer. But because the road is long and the desire is great, I ask that our people devote themselves in a continuance of prayer. As we rise to each new day, and again when each day is spent, let words of prayer be on our lips, invoking Thy help to our efforts.

Give us strength, too -- strength in our daily tasks, to redouble the contributions we make in the physical and the material support of our armed forces. And let our hearts be stout, to wait out the long travail, to bear sorrows that may come, to impart our courage unto our sons wheresoever they may be.

And, O Lord, give us Faith. Give us Faith in Thee; Faith in our sons; Faith in each other; Faith in our united crusade. Let not the keenness of our spirit ever be dulled. Let not the impacts of temporary events, of temporal matters of but fleeting moment let not these deter us in our unconquerable purpose.

With Thy blessing, we shall prevail over the unholy forces of our enemy. Help us to conquer the apostles of greed and racial arrogancies. Lead us to the saving of our country, and with our sister Nations into a world unity that will spell a sure peace a peace invulnerable to the schemings of unworthy men. And a peace that will let all of men live in freedom, reaping the just rewards of their honest toil.

Thy will be done, Almighty God.

Amen.

If any corporate or national prayer can claim to have been answered supernaturally, this one can. Although the allies suffered 10,000 casualties that day on Normandy beach, it was far fewer than the 20,000 that Winston Churchill predicted, and where expectations might have indicated that only two of the five



beachheads could be held, all five landings were successful. Because the weather had been bad the previous two days and was marginal on the 6th, much of the German High Command were not present at the front, and German counterattacks were completely ineffectual in stopping the Allied advance. By the time a storm did put a stop to shipping not quite two weeks later, the Allies had succeeded in putting nearly 630,000 troops, 95,000 vehicles, and 220,000 tons of supplies in France, and were reinforcing the front faster than the Germans could. This could all easily be seen as a result of divine intervention.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt would probably not make the “top ten most Spiritual Presidents in US History” list. His was a very private faith, and he was reluctant to be seen before the nation engaged in an act of worship. He was a man surrounded by intrigue who compartmentalized his life into different worlds, keeping his faith contained within well-defined boundaries. At least one of the biographies that I read in preparation for this article was able to tell FDR’s entire life without mentioning his religion once.

And yet, FDR greatly influenced the shaping of the Presidency as a spiritual institution in the 20th century. FDR was a life-long Episcopalian who was sent to Groton, an exclusive private Prep school in Massachusetts directed by Episcopalian clergyman Endicott Peabody—a man of deep and severe religious conviction who left a deep impression upon FDR, encouraging him to dedicate his life to public service and the betterment of human conditions.

Before the Inaugural Ceremony in 1933, after his first election to the Presidency, Roosevelt took the very unusual step of having a special church service led by Peabody in St. John’s (Episcopal) church in Washington DC before going out to the Capitol. It was but the first of at least three crucial prayer moments in FDR’s presidency.

The second moment came after the beginning of World War 2 but before the



United States entered the war. FDR and Winston Churchill met during the war for the first time face to face at sea off the coast of Newfoundland. On Sunday morning, Aug. 10, 1941, on the British battleship *Prince of Wales*, Churchill arranged for chaplains in the navies of both countries to lead prayers and for three hymns to be sung: “O God our Help in Ages Past,” “Onward Christian Soldiers,” and “Eternal Father, Strong to Save” (the Hymn of the US Navy of which FDR had been

Assistant Secretary during the Wilson administration). Roosevelt felt that this was the key moment of the meeting, joining two peoples in a common faith and purpose to battle the forces of godless totalitarianism.

The third moment, on the evening of June 6, 1944, was precedent-breaking—like so much of FDR’s presidency. The President of the United States had never before led

the nation in prayer. Presidents had previously called for a “day of prayer,” something that FDR acknowledges in the text of his prayer, but none had ever prayed for the country in public.

Franklin Roosevelt took a calculated risk, with the emphasis on the word calculated. In his biography of FDR, Conrad Black writes, “there was a mixture of faith and (political) tactics in his motives.” Back in 1941 Roosevelt had seen how prayer had worked magic on those gathered on *The Prince of Wales*, convincing them of an invisible spiritual reality of the union of two nations in resisting evil. Scholars say that this prayer of June 6, 1944 along with his first inaugural speech was Roosevelt at his most eloquent.

But was it a good thing? The Bible presents two models of political leaders engaging in acts of Spiritual leadership. In 1 Samuel, King Saul disobeys God’s instructions to wait for the prophet Samuel to perform the sacrifices before entering into battle and chooses to offer the sacrifices himself without the prophet. Saul is rebuked and his disobedience, in presuming to take a priestly function to himself, becomes grounds for his future removal as king. In 1 Kings at the dedication of the temple, Solomon prays to God in the presence of all the people asking God to bless the temple and the people. God is so pleased by Solomon’s actions and his prayer in 1 Kings 8, that he appears in a vision to Solomon and says: “*I have heard the prayer and plea you have made before me; I have consecrated this temple, which you have built, by putting my Name there forever.*”

Which of these two models fits the prayer Franklin Roosevelt led the nation in on June 6, 1944? On the one hand, those who lived through the epic struggle that was World War 2 cannot but believe that the prayer offered that night was answered. Even more than 60 years later I can’t help but feel convinced that Nazism, fascism and Japanese Imperialism were human representations of the Evil One and that, on this one occasion at least, our military forces were indeed fighting for the liberation of the world.

There are aspects of the prayer that make me uneasy, however. Roosevelt is praying for the benefit of his listeners more than he is actually praying **to** God. I get the sense that it would make little difference to him if God happened not to listen, as long as the prayer had its desired effect on the audience. FDR perfected here the use of prayer as a political tool.

There is no effort here to pray for one’s enemies. During the Civil War Lincoln was always careful to acknowledge that at least some of the enemy might view themselves as God’s servants also. The only quality that FDR overtly imputes to the enemy is strength, but there is an implicit comparison of *our* forces (*they fight to end conquest. They fight to liberate.*) and the *unholy forces of our enemy* (who presumably fight to conquer and enslave). There is little doubt that our human enemy and our Satanic enemy are here identified with each other. For that reason when the prayer ends *Thy will be done, Almighty God*, FDR leaves little doubt that God’s will **must** be the victory of the Allied forces. This is an affirmation that Lincoln would not have made.

Finally, I am unsure of the wisdom of investing our head of state with spiritual leadership. There seems to me an important qualitative difference between a president asking the religious leaders of the country to call upon their flocks to pray for the country and a president who employs the mass media to lead the nation in prayer and who himself enlists the citizens of the nation in a prayer campaign. It smacks of Saul performing the sacrifices himself without waiting for the man of God. The end result is not Christianity or even a melding of Christianity and Judaism, but Americanism. FDR, like Martin

Luther and Paul, is big on faith, but he asks for a faith that Luther and Paul would regard as false: *And, O Lord, give us Faith. Give us Faith in Thee; Faith in our sons; Faith in each other; Faith in our united crusade.* I don't remember where in the Bible we are asked to have faith in a cause, a country, or our fellow men—quite the contrary.

In the current culture wars, we Christians tend to lament the course of a country which we see as becoming more secular. Is it possible that part of our culture's decline may be due to an increase in **religion** of an unhealthy kind? Allow me to state emphatically that I don't know the answer to that question. Nonetheless, it seems to me that in the latter half of the 20th century the presidency became much more religious rather than less religious.

During the height of the Cold War, Dwight Eisenhower became the first President to pray at his own inauguration. During his presidency the Presidential Prayer Breakfast, which became the National Prayer Breakfast, began. But even after resistance to communism became a thing of the past, the spiritual aspects of the presidency seem to have continued to develop.

It seems to me that the spiritual lives of Coolidge, Cleveland, Grant or even Lincoln seem to be irrelevant to the consideration of their presidencies—but not so for the presidencies of Carter, Clinton, George W. Bush, and even Richard Nixon. Isn't the very fact that Billy Graham seemed to be a de facto chaplain to the American Presidency an indicator of how essential a component spirituality has become in our opinion of the Commander in Chief? We Americans seem to have come to want a President who is religious—a president who has a sense of Divine Calling to his office.

Far be it from me to call this a bad thing. But a Presidency with priestly functions has its pitfalls. Solomon may end up dedicating temples to false foreign gods after he dedicates the Lord's Temple. The president-priest may not remember that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers" and he may send God's ark into battle without God's blessing.

It's something to consider, anyway.



In Christ,
Pastor David