

Religion and Politics

Washington, Lincoln, and the Power of Providential Deism

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Editor's note: Following is a timely excerpt from Rev. Charles Brock's book manuscript, "Holy Warrior Presidents." Rev. Brock, M. Div., M. Litt., taught at Oxford, U.K., for 35 years.

Providential Deism: George Washington was a Providential Deist. Most of the Founding Fathers took the same position. Some commentators have criticized Deism and the Founders for having a mechanical view of God. Others said that Providence was a synonym for destiny or fate (Steiner 41). But Washington's belief was that God *did* intervene in favor of the good and the right to help America, as Israel of old, in taking away the scourge of oppression. "The Battle of Monmouth would have been lost,"

Washington wrote one of his brothers, but for "that bountiful Providence which has never failed us in the hour of distress" (*Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 16, 1 July-14 September 1778, 25-26*). Early on he said, "there is a destiny which has the sovereign control of our actions, not to be resisted by the strongest efforts of human nature" ("To Sarah Cary Fairfax, 12 September 1758"). That was a bit extreme for Washington as it would be for most providentialists. There is always a theological tension between God and man regarding agency. Most of the Founders knew that and did not venture into the depths of the argument but assumed that both God and man were part of the action without trying to carefully define parameters.

Washington devoted some of his First Inaugural Address to a discussion of the "providential agency" at work in the founding – "reflections (which) have forced themselves too strongly on my mind to be suppressed" ("First Inaugural Address: Final Version, 30 April 1789"). Again, this idea was in the air at the time. People believed in God's actions in the world and Washington was part of this mind-set. He saw himself as part of God's providential plan: "[A]s the allwise disposer of events has hitherto watched over my steps," but he wrote while deciding whether to seek a second term, "it will be time enough for me to turn preacher when my

present appointment ceases, and therefore I shall add no more on the Doctrine of Providence” (Brookhiser 146). He was always reticent regarding discussions of personal theology but put it very strongly how he believed about God “ruling” the nation and America’s place in God’s plans.^[1]

Washington believed providence was the Invisible Hand that was instrumental in bringing victory in the Revolution, helped Americans set up their government, and designated that the nation was to be an example for the world of liberty and justice. Washington did not understand providence as fate or fortune as ancient Greeks or Romans sometimes used the term but understood it in the Hebrew sense of an active God who intervened in history. This is easy to criticize and is done so all the time, especially in the contemporary era. One could say that people believed in ghosts, reggae religion, mediums of all sorts, in order to justify their own beliefs. But Washington held firm, as did all the Founders, believing in a just God that was “on our side.”

Deists reacted against a development of Puritanism from 1740 to 1790 known as the Great Awakening that was nurtured by George Whitefield, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards. There may have been class factors as well as purely religious issues because the elite were not well disposed to a religion of enthusiasm, a strong concentration on sin and forgiveness, and vividly picturing the fires of hell for the sinners contrasted with joys of heaven that awaited the evangelicals. Included in the Great Awakening was a binary thinking that makes vivid contrasts between good and evil. The Founders found this thinking awkward and probably for these reasons, they broke with Puritanism with its occasional witch hunts and often narrow views of life. An example of Washington's liberalism against Puritans was his appointment of an army chaplain John Murray, a Universalist who denied the existence of hell, which was anathema to true believers. Other army chaplains petitioned for his dismissal. But it was clear that the Founders didn't reject aspects of British and American Puritanism that fostered freedom and democracy that became so vital to the founding.

The Mission of America: Washington was not a philosophical theorist but a man of vast experience and enormous political savvy. He was a uniting figure allowing the radical Americans to dream their dreams, and he tried to put them into reality. He understood America to be an experiment and said in his first Inaugural Address that “the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the Republican model of Government are [...] staked on the *experiment* entrusted to the hands of the American people” (Dunn and Burns, *George Washington* 133). The experiment was based on Puritan covenant theology, the leading political philosophy of the English Revolution.

Washington believed in a personal providence, as when he was spared at Fort Mifflin in Pennsylvania during the French and Indian War, and later extended it to the nation as a whole. In his First Inaugural Address, he devoted more than a third to pronouncements with providential considerations. Washington appealed to providence, and this is worth quoting at length as it is such a good summary of this theology:

It would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official Act, my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the Universe, who presides in the Councils of Nations, and whose providential aids can supply every human defect, that his benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the People of the United States, a Government instituted by

themselves for these essential purposes. ... No People can be [more] bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the Affairs of men more than the People 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. ... The Power and Goodness of the Almighty were strongly Manifested in the events of our late glorious revolution; and his kind interposition in our behalf has been no less visible in the establishment of our present equal government. In war he directed the Sword, and in peace he has ruled in our Councils” (“First Inaugural Address: Final Version, 30 April 1789”).

No one seems to have possessed a stronger doctrine of providence to understand and direct America. He fervently desired America to be a light to the world, echoing John Winthrop a century and a half earlier. Washington threw in a few Enlightenment doctrines for good measure:

A small portion of the blessed effects which our Revolution will occasion in the rest of the world; yet I enjoy the progress of human society & human happiness in anticipation. I rejoice in a belief that intellectual light will spring up in the dark corners of the earth; that freedom of enquiry will produce liberality of conduct; that mankind will reverse the absurd position that *the many* were made for *the few*; and that they will not continue as slaves in one part of the globe, when they can become freemen in another (“From George Washington to The States, 8 June 1783”).

This is a crucial paragraph for Washington’s idea of America’s role in the world and he was assured by others that this was the right way to go. What the people told the president on his various journeys around America was that they believed that the United States had a revolutionary obligation to promote rights and liberties throughout the world (Breen, *George Washington’s Journey: The President Forges a New Nation* 147). Thus, in this way, the mission of the nation was cemented.

After the French Revolution, Washington rejoiced that “the American Revolution [had] been productive of happy consequences on both sides of the Atlantic” (“From George Washington to Catharine Sawbridge Macaulay Graham, 9 January 1790”). The welfare of America is intimately linked with the “welfare of all humanity” (Gottschalk 135). In a letter from Washington to the French minister on Jan 1, 1796:

Born, Sir, in a land of liberty [meaning Virginia]; having early learned its value; having engaged in a perilous conflict to defend it; having, in a word, devoted the best years of my life to secure its permanent establishment in my own country; my anxious recollections, my sympathetic feelings, and my best wishes are irresistibly excited, whensoever, in any country, I see an oppressed nation unfurl the banners of Freedom” (“From George Washington to Pierre August 1796e Adet, 1 January 1796”).

In summary on Washington’s view of the global mission of America, he believed that America had to live up to morality in order to not only win victories in war but also to show forth righteousness. Washington firmly believed that God's actions were crucial for the freedom of America and that God had delivered America from the British, just as he had the Jews from the Egyptians. He agreed with Winthrop that America was called to be a light unto the nations, but also like

Winthrop, Washington realized that sin was ever present and needed public days of repentance. He agreed with the covenant theology that God's providence would act only when there was repentance sacred and secular and he called for national days of prayer for that purpose.

Other Founders agreed with this political international theology. Benjamin Franklin said, "Our cause is the cause of all mankind, and we are fighting for their liberty in defending our own. It is a glorious task assigned us by Providence" (Hixon 37).

Alexander Hamilton, Washington's close friend (a substitute son as many have said) and amanuensis, also agreed with the principle that America fought not only for itself but to help spread universal values. The rights America strove for during the Revolutionary period were not just for Americans, but for the whole world. They were universal natural rights, granted by God to all regardless of nationality, culture, and history – not just the whims of a particular government. Hamilton was glad that during the French Revolution slavery was thrown out and freedom embraced. In this he went beyond Washington and the Virginia patriots. In 1792, he wrote, "I desire above all things to see the equality of political rights, exclusive of all hereditary distinction, firmly established by a practical demonstration of its being consistent with the order and happiness of society" (R. Morris 124). This was both revolutionary and religious and Franklin and Hamilton agreed with the Father of the Country.

Washington and the Founders thought that one way to spread the mission of America was by immigration: "The bosom of America is open to the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations and Religions" ("From George Washington to Joshua Holmes, 2 December 1783"). Even some French agreed. Lafayette wrote to his wife, "I hope for my sake you will become a good American. It is a sentiment meant for virtuous hearts." In a letter to Lafayette, Washington used Moses, Isaiah, and Matthew:

We have opened the fertile plains of the Ohio to the poor, the needy and the oppressed of the Earth; any one therefore who is heavy laden, or who wants land to cultivate, may repair thither and abound, as in the Land of promise, with milk and honey: the ways are preparing, and the roads will be made easy ("From George Washington to Lafayette, 25 July 1785").

Washington wanted America to be the Promised Land for the downtrodden of the world. He used allusions to Genesis 1:28, Exodus 3:8, Isaiah 40:3-4, and Matthew 11:28:

I wish to see the sons and daughters of the world live in Peace and busily employed in the more agreeable amusement of fulfilling the first and great commandment *Increase and Multiply*: as an encouragement to which we have opened the fertile plains of the Ohio to the poor, the needy and the oppressed of the Earth, any one therefore who is heavy laden, or who wants land to cultivate, may repair thither and about, as in the Land of promise, with milk and honey: the ways are preparing and the roads will be made easy, thro' the channels of Potomac and James River" ("From George Washington to Lafayette, 25 July 1785").

This is amazing. How many other nations would make a claim like this? It shows the deep compassion Washington had for the oppressed of the world, not only

Americans.

But there was a major exception to Washington's empathy. After the Revolution, America did not extend those rights to those Loyalists to the Crown – approximately 60,000 – who were imprisoned, tarred and feathered, and had their property confiscated or were murdered. Thousands lost their possessions and took to exile out of fear (Hooch). One of the basic ideas of all religions is forgiveness, which was in short supply in America at that time. Lincoln was one of the few Presidents who could extend forgiveness to his enemies and urge the nation to do the same, as he did in his Second Inaugural Address. Washington could not manage it with the Loyalists.

Washington, the American Jews, and the Exodus Traditions: It is interesting to see Washington's growing relation to the Jews, few on the ground as they were.^[2] They were the original believers in the mountain god who stormed out of the hills as a man of war and freedom fighter or, as some would say, one holy tough terrorist. There were a number of Jewish patriots in the American Revolution. Most fled the British advances, and one congregation had its Scrolls of the Law burned by a British soldier. Washington had a temporary Jewish landlord in Germantown, and he included a Jew to participate in his presidential inaugural parade. This was unusual at the time, and it did help Jews see America as a new Promised Land and a New Jerusalem: "Like ancient Israel, it flowed with milk and honey. Modifying the hope of almost two millennia that they be gathered by God from the lands of their exile and restored to the land of Israel, Myer Moses prayed that God might bring them all to America" (Faber 130). And there have been Jews since 1789 that have seen America as the new Promised Land, and some are not happy that Orthodox Jews deem that most able Jews should settle in Israel (Cherry). America is God's substitute for Israel, many would argue. "Next year in Jerusalem" always ends the Seder celebrations (Koppelman Ross).

The congratulatory address to President Washington from the Newport, Rhode Island Jewish congregation saw their president with Old Testament allusions – this is worth quoting at length as it gives an insight how the Jews regarded his thinking:

With pleasure we reflect on those days of difficulty and danger when the God of Israel, who delivered David from the peril of the sword, shielded your head in the day of battle; and we rejoice to think that the same spirit which rested in the bosom of the great beloved Daniel, enabling him to preside over the provinces of the Babylonian Empire, rests and ever will rest upon you, enabling you to discharge the arduous duties of the Chief Magistrate of these States ... beseeching Him that the angels who conducted our forefathers through the wilderness into the promised land ... and when, like Joshua, full of days and full of honors, you are gathered to your fathers, may you be admitted into the heavenly paradise to partake of the water of life and the tree of immortality ("From George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, 18 August 1790").

Washington answered with his finely honed writing skills and spoke for toleration against bigotry, and praised the inherent natural rights that all in the United States would now have. He ended his letter, considered one of the most important statements on religious liberty, with allusions to the prophet Micah:

May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue

to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants, while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy (“From George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, 18 August 1790”).

Who said Washington did not read?

Theologically, Washington made the important connection between the Mosaic exodus from Egypt and the revolution in America in a letter that includes a blessing to the Hebrew Congregation of Savannah, May 1790. He used the exodus analogy as did the earlier Puritans and innumerable sermons and political pamphlets during the revolutionary era:

May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian oppressors, planted them in the promised land, whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation, still continue to water them with the dews of heaven and to make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that person whose God is Jehovah (Allen).

Here Washington takes a crucial American narrative used again and again by the Puritan founders of Massachusetts – the coming out of England to America across the sea as parallel to the coming out of Egypt and across the Red Sea – and applies it to the Jews in America.

Though the latter point does not fit with Washington’s use of slaves, what is interesting is his use of Israel and America as exemplars for other nations. Much has been written about Washington’s views on slavery (Wienek). He freed his own slaves at his death (but not his wife’s) and sponsored the idea that slaves could fight in the Revolution and then gain their freedom. The South, however, squashed that idea, even though it probably would have brought an earlier victory.

Washington and Jesus: Washington had little to say about Jesus, and there seems to be only a few references to him. He was certainly a Unitarian in theology if not in membership of that church. But there is one instance when he certainly acted a lot *like* Jesus even if he did not realize it. He was having a rough time in charge of guarding the frontier in Virginia during the period of the French and Indian War. He had come to realize the terrible privations of the Americans who lived there – the raids by the Indians, the scalping, the killing – the dire poverty. He wrote:

But what can I do? If bleeding, dying! Would glut their insatiate revenge – I would be a willing offering to Savage Fury: and die by inches, to save a people! ... I solemnly declare, if I know my own mind – I could offer myself a willing Sacrifice to the butchering Enemy, provided that would contribute to the peoples ease” (quoted in Stark 306).

That looks a lot like Jesus.

Excerpts from **Abraham Lincoln**

The Second Inaugural Address: The most important American speech ever

that linked religion, politics, and war was Abe Lincoln's second inaugural given just weeks before he was assassinated. The letters to Eliza Gurney, the Meditation on the Divine Will, predestination doctrines, and shedding of blood for the remission of sins were crucial backdrops for this.

In his Meditation, Lincoln made crucial points: "God wills this contest, and God wills that it shall not end yet" ("Meditation on the Divine Will"). The purpose of God may well be something quite different from the purpose of either party "and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose" ("Meditation on the Divine Will"). But this position does not let America out of its responsibilities. Here, Lincoln again reflects his Calvinist background when he states that mankind transgresses and is culpable, yet sin can work for the glory of God. All of America must repent; all of the States agreed to have slaves at some point; otherwise, it forfeits its special role as "the last best, hope of earth" ("Annual Message to Congress"). Lincoln put the matter in context:

When our own beloved Country, once, by the blessing of God, united, prosperous and happy, is now afflicted with faction and civil war, it is peculiarly fit for us to recognize the hand of God in this terrible visitation, and in sorrowful remembrance of our own faults and crimes as a nation and as individuals, to humble ourselves before Him, and to pray for His mercy – to pray that we may be spared further punishment, though most justly deserved ("Proclamation of a National Fast Day"). The speech itself is only 703 words and four paragraphs. It is laden with biblical quotes and allusions (R. White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural*).

He used his concept of providence to understand the past and set the stage for the future. Frederick Douglass, the Black leader and former slave whom Lincoln relied on toward the end, said approvingly that it was "more like a sermon than a state paper" (quoted in Miller, et al. 11). However, Lincoln's words seem more like a Puritan jeremiad. Lincoln delineates a belief in a God who directs nations and expects that nations will answer for their actions. The first paragraph sums up where the nation was at the time and "is as well known to the public as to myself (... but) no prediction in regard to the future is ventured" ("Second Inaugural Address of Abraham Lincoln").

The second paragraph claims all dreaded a civil war, and all sought to avert it, though the South wanted the Union dissolved. Lincoln admitted that the government claimed no right to do no more than to restrict the growth of slavery in the new territories. But Lincoln changed the main reason for war from keeping the Union together to the question of slavery by the Emancipation Proclamation and long before the Second Inaugural. The North could not force the South to give up slavery, and they had no thought of so doing. So, the war came.

The third and longest paragraph claims that slavery, which was one-eighth of the whole population – somehow – was the true cause of the war and moves on to God's work of providence. The whole paragraph is one of his most important theological and political reflections:

Both [sides] 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 full. The Almighty has his own purposes. 'Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to the man by whom the offence cometh' [*New King James Version*, Matt. 18.7]. If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences 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 offence 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 bondman'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' [*New King James Version*, Psalms 19.].

There are some important hermeneutics here, including the point that people who read the same Bible often arrive at very different interpretations of what is going on in their worlds. Lincoln claims that God could not answer contradictory prayers or even those of them more in the right than in the wrong. A stinging criticism of slavery is made using the irony that the well-off take their wealth from the sweat of other faces than their own.

The main point of the paragraph is that God at that time wanted the world rid of the offense of slavery, whatever God may have thought before – like Lincoln himself changing his mind. (cf. Genesis 9) It was time for humankind to grow up and to move beyond the Bible passages that support slavery. The war was God's way to settle the matter. The war would continue until there was payment in kind so that "every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword" ("Second Inaugural Address"). The speech delves into the atonement theology that Lincoln was asking Congressman William Kellogg about. The message was harsh, but for Lincoln it was essential.

Lincoln was not the first to blame both South and North. Many abolitionists claimed slavery was a national sin of the whole nation, not just the South. Among others, Harriet Beecher Stowe concludes *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with a similar point: "A day of grace is yet held out to us. Both North and South have been guilty before God, and the *Christian church* has a heavy account to answer ... this Union to be saved, but by repentance, justice, and mercy ... otherwise injustice and cruelty shall bring on nations the wrath of Almighty God" (446).

Providence would seek retribution for sins past and sins present. Reinhold Niebuhr points out that Lincoln never assumed that God was unambiguously on the North's side, unlike Julia Ward Howe's famous *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, but his concern was whether he was on God's side. He wrote, "Among all the statesmen of ancient and modern periods, Lincoln alone had a sense of historical meaning so high as to cast doubt on the intentions of both sides and to place the enemy into the same category of ambiguity as the nation to which his life was committed" (quoted in S. Smith, *Getting Over Equality: A Critical Diagnosis of Religious Freedom in America* 183).

Lincoln, too, was not free from this sin. Hating slavery, he nonetheless tolerated it

until the Emancipation Proclamation signed Jan. 1, 1863, and finally not until 1864, when he pressed for the emancipation amendment to the Constitution and had been willing to allow it to continue indefinitely, hoping for gradual change, if its continuance would preserve the Union (Tackach 134). But he believed he also was implicated in God's punishment for slavery.

To the surprise of many, Lincoln blamed the Founding Era for slavery. Doubtless Lincoln would have preferred Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration of Independence that charged George III as waging "a cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred right of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither" (T. Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, 1776-1781* 52).^[3] But the Southern delegations insisted these words be struck from the Declaration, and for the sake of unity against Britain, the Northern colonies agreed. The blame there is on the North, too. Later in 1789, the Constitution did not outlaw slavery.

Lincoln knew that his second inaugural address might not go down well. However, he said:

I expect the latter to wear as well as – perhaps better than – anything I have produced; but I believe it is not immediately popular. Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them. To deny it, however, in this case, is to deny that there is a god governing the world. It is a truth which I thought needed to be told; and as whatever of humiliation there is in it, falls most directly on myself, I thought others might afford for me to tell it" ("A Letter to Thurlow Weed").

That was brave, and few politicians then and now would be able to do and say this.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation in the Second Inaugural: Lincoln's final paragraph in the Second Inaugural is a heartfelt plea for reconciliation. He wrote:

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 a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations ("Second Inaugural Address of Abraham Lincoln").

This peace was not expected by many Northerners who hoped for severe retribution, and not agreed to by Southerners, such as John Wilkes Booth, who was at the Inaugural Address and who killed the president within a few weeks. Some agreed with Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, who said, "I charge the whole guilt of this war upon the ... leaders of the South" (quoted in Beecher 688). Lincoln, of course, disagreed profoundly, seeing both North and South at fault.

A crucial difference exists between the end of this speech and Lincoln's famous Cooper Union Address of February 1860. He concluded that speech by saying, "Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it" (quoted in B. Thomas, *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography* 204). In the Second Inaugural, Lincoln's understanding had changed: "as God gives us to see the right" (qtd. in R. White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* 172). Some would say that this idea comes to the same thing,

and that believers simply hang their own preconceived opinions onto God, but for Lincoln this is a sincere change caused by the development of this theology. Wolf calls the speech “the climax of Lincoln’s religious development” (*Lincoln’s Religion* 181). As a young man Lincoln was a skeptic. In middle age, he had rediscovered the Puritan God and faith of the founders of New England.

He liked Biblical binaries. Lincoln used a famous quote that “a house divided against itself cannot stand” (quoted in Wilson and Davis 22). In his Senate campaign against Stephen Douglas in 1858, he made his argument how slavery would be resolved, claiming, “I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved – but I do expect it will cease to be divided. ... It will become all one thing, or all the other” (“Speech at Chicago, Illinois”).

Yet, Lincoln believed in forgiveness and reconciliation. When he was first in office, he even tried to get a Southern slaveholder in his Cabinet. This attempt caused many to question his integrity and/or pragmatism (W. Harris 16). Charles Francis Adams, the son and grandson of presidents, said, “[Lincoln’s speeches] betray a person unconscious of his position as well as the nature of the contest around him” (quoted in R. White, *A. Lincoln: A Biography* 376). He thought him “good natured, kindly,” but “frivolous and uncertain” (quoted in R. White, *A. Lincoln: A Biography* 377). He also said that Lincoln’s speeches “put to flight all notions of greatness” (quoted in R. White, *A. Lincoln: A Biography* 377). President of Harvard Edward Everett, the speech giver at Gettysburg with Lincoln, agreed and said, “He is evidently a person of very inferior cast of character, wholly unequal to the crisis” (qtd. in R. White, *A. Lincoln: A Biography* 372, 376).^[4]

When toward the end of the War the Yankees yelled, “Richmond! Babylon is fallen!!,” Lincoln made sure that there was to be no revenge, and he spared Richmond the drunken destruction that Columbia went through. To save as much of the city as possible all unneeded Union troops were sent back to camp and those who remained stacked their arms and formed fire squads helping to put out fires (Stout 437). Not only did he win the war, but he was also able to show forth acts of reconciliation – not “a person of very inferior cast of character” (a not atypical Ivy League comment at that time about one from the Midwest, but one who understood covenant theology and the love that made it work on both sides: God and man).

At various times Lincoln proclaimed nine separate days of fasting, thanksgiving, or prayer during the Civil War. The proclamation of March 30, 1863, shows not only the course of the sin of the nation according to Lincoln but also his understanding of the hand of God that leads America. He mentions how America has received many blessings that were unacknowledged, SW, and that God has been forgotten, which helped cause the Civil War (“Proclamation Appointing a National Fast Day”). It was the worst war in percentage of casualties that America ever had. Lincoln took part of the blame himself, but he refused to excoriate the South. He did not even hold Robert E. Lee and his generals in contempt, nor did Lincoln’s successor Andrew Johnson put them in jail after the War.^[5]

Exporting the Dream: Regarding the exporting of the dream of a slave-free society to other countries (though America was one of the last to free the slaves), Lincoln was modest in his views. He asserted, “It is the duty of our government neither to ferment, nor assist, such revolutions in other governments”

(“Resolutions in Behalf of Hungarian Freedom”). America is the “last, best hope of earth” because “in giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free” (quoted in Nester 158). Lincoln believed that “the Supreme Being who has never yet forsaken this favored land” would not do so in the future (“First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861”). In his eulogy for Henry Clay in 1852, he seemed to strike a more universalist note about the mission of America:

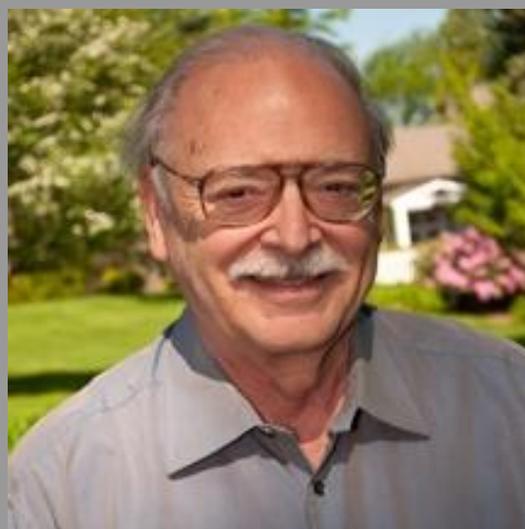
Such a man the times demanded, and such, in the providence of God was given us. ... He loved his country partly because it was his own country, but mostly because it was a free country; and he burned with a zeal for its advancement, prosperity, and glory because he saw in such the advancement, prosperity, and glory of human liberty, human right, and human nature (“Eulogy of Henry Clay, July 6, 1852, Springfield, Illinois”).

America was not only for itself, he is saying, it can advance liberty and human rights for the world.

The Civil War was partly fought to show that popular government was not an absurdity. He told his secretary John Hay, “We must settle this question now, whether in a free government the minority have the right to break up the government whenever they choose. If we fail it will go far to prove the incapability of the people to govern themselves” (quoted in Goodwin 212) A vital issue indeed, and the future of the U.S. depended on it, as did many other nations that modeled themselves after America. Lincoln thus follows the tradition of the Puritan founders along with the early presidents in seeing God’s understanding the role of America as not only for itself, but for the ultimate benefit of the world. Here, indeed, is the “almost chosen nation.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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End Notes

1. Matthew Stewart gets it very badly wrong indeed: “Washington’s God functions chiefly as a synonym for what the ancients called variously ‘chance,’ ‘fate,’ and ‘fortune.’” Stewart, Matthew. *Nature’s God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2015, 192.
2. Cf. Hirschfeld, Fritz. *George Washington and the Jews*. University of Delaware Press, 2005 – Jews numbered 1,500 to 2,500 in the 13 Colonies in 1775 – less than ½ of 1% of the total white population.
3. My underline.
4. Interestingly, Lincoln always signed “A. Lincoln” for his signature, as he did for the charter of Penn State University where I teach, a government land-grant college.
5. He took little notice of American Indians and their sufferings, and on one meeting at the White House

with fourteen chiefs he patronizingly told them the world was round and to become less warlike like the white people are[!]. He encouraged whites to continue the exploitation of the West's land inhabited by Indians.

6. Cf. Eric Foner's book, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (W. W. Norton & Co., 2010 – see page 262).

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