

President Kennedy's Speeches

Recently I was invited to speak at a dinner hosted by a Christian group at the Kennedy Museum in Dallas. They asked if I might speak about President John F. Kennedy and relate it to some of the issues we are dealing with today.

I began by asking them to imagine what might happen if we could bring President Kennedy in a time machine to our time and place. What would he think of what has happened in America?

Of course, we cannot accurately predict what he might think, but we do have his speeches that give us some insight into his perspective on the major issues in the 1960s. And as I re-read his great speeches, I think the audience concluded that they said more about the change in America than anything else.

I think it would be fair to say that President Kennedy's speeches illustrate what was mainstream (perhaps even a bit progressive) back in the 1960s. Today (with perhaps the exception of his speech on church/state issues) most of his ideas would be considered right wing. And if I might be so bold, I think it is reasonable to say that many of the leaders of his party today would reject many of the ideas he put forward more than forty years ago.

Foreign Policy

Let's first look at President Kennedy's perspective on foreign policy. One of his best known speeches is his inaugural address on January 20, 1961:

Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage—and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing

of those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

In his day, the great foreign policy challenge was communism. The threat from the Soviet Union, as well as Red China, was his primary focus. And he made it clear that he would bring an aggressive foreign policy to the world in order to assure the survival and success of liberty.

Today the great foreign policy challenge is international terrorism (which is a topic that President Kennedy addressed in his day). And there are still threats to America and the need to address the issue of human rights that he talked about more than forty years ago. America still needs a foreign policy that aggressively deals with terrorists who would threaten our freedom and dictators who keep whole nations in bondage.

It may surprise many to realize that more than forty years ago President Kennedy understood the threat of terrorism. Here is what he said to the General Assembly of the United Nations on September 25, 1961:

Terror is not a new weapon. Throughout history it has been used by those who could not prevail, either by persuasion or example. But inevitably they fail, either because men are not afraid to die for a life worth living, or because the terrorists themselves came to realize that free men cannot be frightened by threats, and that aggression would meet its own response. And it is in the light of that history that every nation today should know, be he friend or foe, that the

United States has both the will and the weapons to join free men in standing up to their responsibilities.

Terrorism is with us in the twenty-first century, though the terrorists today are primarily radical Muslims. And President Kennedy rightly understood the threat terrorism posed to freedom. As we just saw, he proposed an aggressive foreign policy to deal with these threats. He knew that “free men cannot be frightened by threats.”

President Kennedy also spoke to the issue of human rights. In his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, he quoted from the book of Isaiah to illustrate his point:

Let both sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah—to “undo the heavy burdens . . . and to let the oppressed go free.”

And if a beachhead of cooperation may push back the jungle of suspicion, let both sides join in creating a new endeavor, not a new balance of power, but a new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved.

He envisioned a future world where people were not enslaved by communism and held behind an Iron Curtain or Bamboo Curtain. When he spoke in West Berlin on June 26, 1963, he addressed the importance of freedom:

Freedom is indivisible, and when one man is enslaved, all are not free. When all are free, then we can look forward to that day when this city will be joined as one and this country and this great Continent of Europe in a peaceful and hopeful globe. When that day finally comes, as it will, the people of West Berlin can take sober satisfaction in the fact that they were in the front lines for almost two decades.

All free men, wherever they may live, are citizens of Berlin, and, therefore, as a free man, I take pride in the words “Ich

bin ein Berliner."

President Kennedy saw the day when men and women on both sides of the Berlin Wall would be free.

Economic Policy

President Kennedy proposed a significant cut in taxes. Here is what he said to the Economic Club of New York on December 14, 1962:

The final and best means of strengthening demand among consumers and business is to reduce the burden on private income and the deterrents to private initiative which are imposed by our present tax system—and this administration pledged itself last summer to an across-the-board, top-to-bottom cut in personal and corporate income taxes to be enacted and become effective in 1963.

I'm not talking about a 'quickie' or a temporary tax cut, which would be more appropriate if a recession were imminent. Nor am I talking about giving the economy a mere shot in the arm, to ease some temporary complaint. I am talking about the accumulated evidence of the last five years that our present tax system, developed as it was, in good part, during World War II to restrain growth, exerts too heavy a drag on growth in peace time; that it siphons out of the private economy too large a share of personal and business purchasing power; that it reduces the financial incentives for personal effort, investment, and risk-taking. In short, to increase demand and lift the economy, the federal government's most useful role is not to rush into a program of excessive increases in public expenditures, but to expand the incentives and opportunities for private expenditures.

He so believed in the need to cut taxes that he focused whole

paragraphs of his 1963 State of the Union speech on the same topic. Here is one of those paragraphs:

For it is increasingly clear—to those in government, business, and labor who are responsible for our economy's success—that our obsolete tax system exerts too heavy a drag on private purchasing power, profits, and employment. Designed to check inflation in earlier years, it now checks growth instead. It discourages extra effort and risk. It distorts the use of resources. It invites recurrent recessions, depresses our Federal revenues, and causes chronic budget deficits.

In the last few decades, many Democrat leaders have criticized President Reagan and President Bush for comparing their tax cut proposals to those of President Kennedy. But there are significant similarities. President Kennedy was not just proposing a quick fix or an economic “shot in the arm.” He saw that taxes exert “a drag on growth” in the economy. If that was true in the 1960s when the taxes on the average American were lower than today, then it is even more true today.

Church and State

Church and state was a major issue in his campaign since he was Catholic. So he chose to speak to the issue in front of the Greater Houston Ministerial Alliance on September 12, 1960:

I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute; where no Catholic prelate would tell the President—should he be Catholic—how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference, and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the President who might appoint him, or the people who might elect him.

I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish; where no public official either requests or accept instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source; where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials, and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all.

For while this year it may be a Catholic against whom the finger of suspicion is pointed, in other years it has been—and may someday be again—a Jew, or a Quaker, or a Unitarian, or a Baptist. It was Virginia's harassment of Baptist preachers, for example, that led to Jefferson's statute of religious freedom. Today, I may be the victim, but tomorrow it may be you—until the whole fabric of our harmonious society is ripped apart at a time of great national peril.

We can agree with President Kennedy that religious leaders should not demand that a politician vote a certain way. But we live in the free society, so pastors should be free to express their biblical perspective on social and political issues.

That is one of the reasons Representative Walter Jones has sponsored legislation known as the "Houses of Worship Freedom of Speech Restoration Act" to make this possible. Back in 1954, then-Senator Lyndon Johnson introduced an amendment to a tax code revision that was being considered on the Senate floor. The amendment prohibited all non-profit groups—including churches—from engaging in political activity without losing their tax-exempt status. The bill by Representative Jones would return that right to churches and allow pastors and churches greater freedom to speak to these issues.

Social Issues

One issue that surfaced during Kennedy's presidency was the subject of school prayer. In 1962, the Supreme Court issued its decision in *Engel v. Vitale*. This was President Kennedy's response:

We have in this case a very easy remedy, and that is to pray ourselves. And I would think it would be a welcome reminder to every American family that we can pray a good deal more at home, we can attend our churches with a good deal more fidelity, and we can make the true meaning of prayer much more important in the lives of our children.

At the time, this may have seemed like an isolated and even necessary action by the Supreme Court. Few could have anticipated that this would be the beginning of the removal of prayer, Bible reading, and even the Ten Commandments from the classrooms of America.

So how would John F. Kennedy stand on the issue of abortion? Well, we simply don't know, since abortion was not a major policy issue in 1963.

We do know that as a Catholic, he and the other Kennedys valued life. In the 1968 election, Robert F. Kennedy was asked about the subject of contraception. The Supreme Court handed down its decision on contraception in the case *Griswold v. Connecticut* in 1965, and so Bobby Kennedy was asked about his views on the subject. Kennedy at that time had ten children. He used the Kennedy wit and turned the question into a funny line. He replied, "You mean personally or as governmental policy?"

We do know that President Kennedy did nominate Byron White to the Supreme Court. It's worth noting that he and Justice Rehnquist were the only two dissenting votes in the case of *Roe v. Wade*.

By the way, when Justice White left the court and President Clinton nominated Ruth Bader Ginsberg, you didn't hear anyone in the media talk about the court shifting to the left. Byron York, writing for *National Review*, did a Lexis-Nexis search and did not find one major media outlet that talked about this shift. By contrast, he found sixty-three times in which the media lamented the potential shift of the court to the right with the nomination of Judge Samuel Alito.

As we have looked at some of President Kennedy's speeches, it is amazing how much of the political dialogue has moved. But to be more precise, it is America that has moved.

It reminds you of the story of a middle-aged man and wife. One day as her husband was driving the car, she began talking about how it used to be when they first dated. They always held hands, they had long talks, and they used to sit next to each other as they drove along the countryside. Finally, she asked her husband, "Why don't we ever sit together anymore when we drive?" He glanced over and said to her, "I'm not the one who moved."

Reading President Kennedy's speeches remind us that America has moved. Maybe it's time to get back to where we belong.

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Church and State

Introduction

Soon after assuming office as president, Thomas Jefferson received a letter from the Danbury Baptist Association of Connecticut containing warm congratulations for his victory.

In January of 1802 Jefferson drafted a response of unpredictable importance. The contents of the letter have influenced the shape of the American debate over the place of religion in public affairs ever since. Addressing the Baptists, Jefferson wrote:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinion, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church and State. {1} (emphasis added)

The idea of a "high wall of separation" first entered into our nation's judicial conscience in the 1947 *Everson v. Board of Education* case. Although the court decided to allow public funding for the transportation of Catholic school students, it invoked the "high wall" doctrine as a rule for determining the future use of public funds. Justice Hugo Black appealed to Supreme Court precedent as well as the intent of the Founding Fathers in winning his 5-4 decision which included the "high wall" language. Justice Black wrote that our founders "reached the conviction that individual religious liberty could be achieved best under a government which was stripped of all power to tax, to support, or otherwise to assist any or all religions, or to interfere with the beliefs of any religious individual or group." {2} This 1947 decision became the catalyst for a growing debate in the last half of the 20th century regarding the relationship between faith and government in America.

The phrase *high wall of separation* has divided Americans into a number of different groups depending upon their theological and political leanings. Some feel that the high court

drastically overstepped the original meaning of Jefferson's words, going far beyond his original intent. Others applaud the Court's attempt to separate once and for all this country's bias towards Christianity, especially its Protestant wing. Since the question often revolves around the original intent of the Founding Fathers, many seek to determine whether or not the Founders supported a Christian state, a secular state, or something in between.

All of this points to a few important questions faced by Christians. How should individual believers and the church as a whole relate to the state and its various institutions? What about the role individuals should take in politics, efforts to reform government, and attempts to pass laws that make our society behave more "biblically"? In this article we will look at three different responses to these questions and examine some of the pros and cons of each. Since every believer is limited in both their time and resources, it is important to think carefully about where we focus our efforts in furthering God's kingdom. The purpose of this discussion is not to question anyone's commitment to Christ, but to merely step back and look at some of the underlying assumptions held by each of these three positions.

Anti-Religious Separatists

Americans support the notion of separation of church and state by a small majority.[\[3\]](#) Just what we mean by *separate* seems to be the real issue. Some go as far as to argue that any position on public policy that is motivated by a religious belief is out of bounds and should not receive a hearing. This group, who might be called "anti-religious separatists," argues that religion is fine as long as it does not invade the public sphere. Religion must impact only private morality; if it leaks into the public square where policy making actually occurs, it is inappropriate at best. There are many examples of such anti-religious bias. Writing about a speech that

Ronald Reagan made that included religious overtones, a *New York Times* article said, "You don't have to be a secular humanist to take offense at that display of what, in America, should be private piety. . . . Americans ask piety in Presidents, not displays of religious preference. Mr. Reagan uttered not just an ecumenical summons to the spirit. He was pandering to the Christian right that helped to propel his national political career."[\[4\]](#) Another presidential candidate wrote, "No president should attempt to transform policy debates into theological disputes."[\[5\]](#) Some believe the separation of church and state to mean a complete separation of religious values from public policy debates.

It's one thing to complain of inappropriate public piety, it is quite another to apply an anti-religious bias to court decisions and other actions that affect all Americans, religious or not. In one of the most important Supreme Court decisions on the separation of church and state in regards to education, Justices William Douglas and Hugo Black concurred that religious schools are by nature harmful. Writing specifically about Catholics schools they said:

The whole education of the child is filled with propaganda. That, of course, is the very purpose of such schools, the very reason for going to all of the work and expense of maintaining a dual school system. Their purpose is not so much to educate, but to indoctrinate and train, not to teach Scripture truths and Americanism, but to make loyal Roman Catholics. The children are regimented, and are told what to wear, what to do, and what to think.[\[6\]](#)

Although this quote refers specifically to Catholic schools, its description could apply to many types of private religious schools. This caricature of private Christian schools, that they do not teach but indoctrinate, that they fail to convey Americanism (whatever that is), is still a concern of many who have observed and objected to the recent rapid growth in

private schooling.

Those who hold an “anti-religious separatist” viewpoint often talk positively of an American civil religion. The idea is that some religion might be better than no religion at all, but it must never actually enter into policy decisions. A thin veneer of religion is all that is needed. An example might be President Dwight Eisenhower urging Americans to spend the first Fourth of July holiday of his administration in prayer and penance. He then proceeded to fish in the morning, go golfing in the afternoon, and play cards all evening.{7}

When Christians advocate such a vague form of public religion, they do great harm to the faith. A lukewarm civil religion does not address the redeeming sacrifice that makes Christianity what it is. Nor does it value the revealed knowledge found in the Bible. The idea of providing America with a non- preferential treatment of religion is legitimate. The danger lies in the promotion of religious activity that waters down the beliefs of the various faiths, both Christian and non-Christian.

Christian America

It is a popular notion among Christians that America was founded as a Christian nation, and that the goal of believers everywhere should be to place our government back into the hands of committed Christians who hold acceptable views on theological and moral issues. As a corollary to this position, it follows that our nation’s institutions, its schools, courts, regulatory commissions, etc, should be established on Christian principles. Various Christian groups use language that supports this view. The Christian Coalition, Eagle Forum, Concerned Women for America, and others often present this perspective. Jerry Falwell has stated, “Any diligent student of American history finds that our great nation was founded by godly men upon godly principles to be a Christian nation.”{8} John Whitehead, in his 1977 book *The Separation Illusion*,

wrote, "In recent years Christians and non-Christians alike have been questioning whether America was ever a Christian nation. Without doubt it was, but secular historians have eradicated as much Christian influence as possible from history."[\[9\]](#)

Pat Robertson began the Christian Coalition in response to this perceived conspiracy to purge our history and government from Christianity. Stating its goals, its executive director said, "What Christians have got to do is take back this country, one precinct at a time, one neighborhood at a time, and one state at a time, I honestly believe that in my lifetime we will see a country once again governed by Christians . . . and Christian values."[\[10\]](#)

This view has much to commend itself in the actual words used by our Founding Fathers. John Eidsmoe, Peter Marshall, Marshall Foster, and David Barton have provided a wealth of examples in their writings of how the Founders used Christian ideas and terminology to describe their efforts to create a new nation.

Those who hold to this view are comfortable with making Christianity the semi- established religion of America. Everywhere the government is involved in our lives would take on a Christian flavor. Every citizen, regardless of religious affiliation, would be responsible for understanding and adjusting to this ubiquitous Christian culture.

To many, this would be doing to those of other faiths, including atheists, just what we have been accusing them of doing to Christians. Forcing people to separate their public lives from their beliefs and thus denying them their first amendment freedom of religion. Another question that arises is, What are Christians going to do if they fail to muster the necessary votes to put into place the people and legislation that they desire?

This line of thinking can easily lead to a “whatever it takes” mentality to return the nation to its Christian roots, including armed revolt if necessary. This form of Christian ethnocentricity discounts the importance of Christians in other countries and the possibility that God might use other nations as well as the U.S. to accomplish His purposes.

There is no question that we have been blessed as a nation because our Founding Fathers built our government on Christian principles regarding human nature and a theistic view of reality. We enjoy common grace as a people when our laws conform to God’s standard of justice. The question that we must ask is, Can we as Christians can impose a biblical culture on a majority who no longer acknowledge the authority of Scripture? Since only 32 percent of Americans agree that “The government should take special steps to protect the Judeo-Christian heritage,” this question is more than theoretical.[{11}](#) Perhaps a better goal would be to work for a government based on the concepts of freedom and neutrality with regards to religion.

Positive Neutrality

The idea of positive neutrality begins with the assumption that both religious structures and the state possess a certain degree of sovereignty over their respective domains. Each possess certain rights and responsibilities and should be free to operate without interference from the other. As the Dutch Protestant Abraham Kuyper stated it: “The sovereignty of the State and the sovereignty of the Church exist side by side, and they mutually limit each other.”[{12}](#) Christians can find support for this view in biblical passages that describe both the church and the state as divinely ordained realities (1 Peter 2 and Romans 13).

Positive neutrality argues that religious organizations have both rights and responsibilities. According to Stephen Monsma, author of *Positive Neutrality*, religious groups have the right

to develop and teach their core beliefs, to shape their member's behavior and attitudes, to provide a wide range of services to members and non-members, and to participate in the policy making process of our republic. On the responsibility side, religious organizations must both accept and seek to enhance the authority and legitimacy of the state and encourage its members to obey its lawful decisions. Religious groups should also seek to develop civic virtue that enhances public life and not attempt to take over those things given to the state to perform. This does not mean that religious groups do not have the right to criticize the state; it means that they may not work to remove its legitimacy.

According to the notion of positive neutrality, the state also has certain rights and responsibilities. The government should make decisions that coordinate, protect, encourage, and empower society's various spheres of influence (including the religious sphere) with the goal of promoting justice, the public interest, the common good, or some other similar goal. The state is not to transgress the sovereignty of the other spheres although there are times when it is appropriate for the state to give material aid, in a neutral manner, to organizations in another sphere.

The immediate impact of moving towards a system of positive neutrality would be reflected in three areas. First, our political system would have to tolerate and accommodate a wider range of religious practices. Second, the state would have to protect the right of religious groups to influence public policies. And finally, rather than working only through secularly based groups and programs, the government would fund the activities of both religious and secular groups for the purpose of providing needed social programs. These changes may be possible only by dropping the "secular purpose" part of what is known as the Lemon test, a three part test for appropriate government spending resulting from the *Lemon v. Kurtzman* Supreme Court case in 1971.

What this means, in effect, is that when the government gives financial aid to schools, homeless shelters, day care, or other agencies, it cannot discriminate against religiously based organizations. To continue to do so shows a bias towards secular organizations, motivations, and ideals.

Conclusion

We have considered three views of how the church and the state should relate to each other. The first was the anti-religious separatists. This group included those who desire what could be called a naked public square, naked of any religious influence. The second was the Christian America perspective; it advocates a sacred public square and the semi-establishment of the Christian religion. The third view is called positive neutrality, which argues for an open public square. The first two positions discriminate against the religious rights of Christians or non-Christians, the last treats all religious groups equally and does not favor secular organizations over religious ones.

Let's look at the specific issue of religion in our schools and see how the notion of positive neutrality might change what we consider to be constitutional and what isn't. Currently the Court uses a three part test to determine constitutionality. First, a program must have a secular purpose. Second, it cannot further a religious effect, and finally, it may not cause excessive entanglement between religion and the state. In its attempt at applying these rules, the Court has created a very unclear line of what is permissible and what isn't. It has forbidden state-composed prayers, Bible reading, reading of the Lord's Prayer, posting the Ten Commandments, a minute of silence for meditation and prayer, mandating the teaching of evidence for creationism, and certain types of prayers at graduation ceremonies. However, it has permitted release time programs held off campus for religious instruction, teaching about religion,

transportation for private school children, a minute of silence for meditation, and voluntary, student-led and -initiated religious clubs.

The obvious result of the Lemon test has been a bias against the religious and for the secular, not neutrality. In trying to account for local religious practices, some justices have argued that prayer and religious celebrations are actually secular and traditional activities rather than acts of worship. This tactic satisfies no one. Positive neutrality argues for a full and free play of all religious groups and of both religion and secularism. True neutrality is achieved by welcoming and encouraging all religions and secular philosophies to participate in the open marketplace of ideas on campus.

True neutrality could be accomplished in our public schools by applying the equal access principle the Court used in *Westside Community Schools v. Mergen*. This decision treated all extracurricular clubs, both religious and secular, with neutrality. This principle could be applied to prayer, the study of origins, and the posting of the Ten Commandments. In effect, this would remove some of the anti-religious bias that pervades public schools.

Neutrality is also enhanced when the government encourages educational choice by funding private schools regardless of their religious or non-religious nature. By allowing vouchers for parents to use to send their children to religious schools of their choice, the government would be treating religious and non-religious schools in a neutral manner.

Positive neutrality insists that religious ideas should never be forced to hide themselves behind secular ones in order to participate in the public square. The government is not being neutral when it endorses a secular idea over a religious one in our schools or in other social programs. While many Americans are unhappy with the government's current bias

against religious beliefs, it remains to be seen if they are ready for real religious freedom that would allow full participation in the public realm by all faiths and philosophies.

Notes

1. Edwin Gaustad, *Sworn On The Altar Of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 99.

2. Wayne House, ed., *Restoring The Constitution* (Dallas, TX: Probe Books, 1987), 298.

3. Stephen V. Monsma, *Positive Neutrality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 57.

4. Ibid., 63.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 71.

7. George Will, "Who Put Morality In Politics?" *Newsweek*, 1980.

8. Monsma, 73.

9. John Whitehead, *The Separation Illusion* (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1977), 17.

10. Monsma, 73.

11. Ibid., 57.

12. Ibid., 179.