



**RELIGION AND THE
AMERICAN PRESIDENCY:
FEATURING THE SIGNED
BIBLES OF THE QUAYLE
COLLECTION**

Quayle Bible Collection
Open Saturdays & Sundays
September 12, 2020 ~ May 23, 2021

Who Founded America?

Often the discussion of religion in America goes back to the founders and the European Colonists. However, it is a very complicated issue that cannot be summed up easily, and these arguments never take into account the indigenous peoples that were already living in the Americas and practicing their own religions. If we follow the common narrative that the Pilgrims escaping religious persecution were the founders, even though Europeans had been in the Americas long before, they began their own branch of religious persecution by accusing other Christians of being witches. They are not an ideal group to point to, and their sphere of influence primarily resided in New England. Then we have to rely on the colonists who eventually would rebel against Britain, as being the “founders.” As seen on the posters, many of these founders were not the most “ideal” Christians either. Some were Unitarians, Deists, or even not religious. Not to mention in the 1700s, America already had a population of Jews and Muslims, some of whom fought in the Revolutionary War. As a result, the majority of the founders supported the idea that the United States would be a secular nation without a national church. However, like most of history, people have a vested interest in the narratives that agree or disagree with this. As a result, the debate and the interpretations continue.

Special thanks to Dr. Susan Emel who helped talk through some of these ideas.

The Presidents and Religion

The north wall contains additional debates and topics surrounding the Presidents and religion. This includes issues of secularism, the debate of “In God We Trust,” and swearing the Oath of Office on the Bible. These topics are just a small window into the debates of Christianity and the Presidency.

Standalone Case

On the south wall beneath the tapestry, the case portrays the family Bibles of two soldiers who stand opposed to one another. One family would forever be known as the “first” family of the United States, and the other would forever be synonymous with treachery. On the upper left are pictures from when the Quayle Bible Collection housed the Washington family Bible from Mount Vernon. The Bible in the bottom right is the family Bible of Benedict Arnold.

Early American Bibles

The founders of the United States knew the Bible well. Which editions they preferred may be a mystery. As seen in the next case, Thomas Jefferson read the Bible in at least four different languages: English, French, Latin, and Greek. Undoubtedly, the King James Bible is the most important biblical text for most of the early American colonists, whose families came from Britain. However, during the war, the King James Version was not easy to acquire and eventually it was published illegally by Robert Aitken. The Continental Congress approved his activities as a “pious and laudable act.” However, the Puritans of New England read the Geneva Bible and translated it into languages such as Eliot’s Algonquin. Then there is the Muhlenberg Legend. The legend states that the first Speaker of the House, Frederick Muhlenberg, was the deciding vote to prevent German from being the official language of the US. Even if the legend is

not true, the assumption is that many of the founders had the ability to speak and read fluent German. This might suggest that Luther's translation was much more important to some of the early founders than the King James Version.

Early Presidents and the Bible

The religion of the President of the United States is usually a contested issue, as seen with the posters on the north wall. However, there were several presidents who were influenced by religion regardless of their belief. It is widely accepted that Thomas Jefferson was a Deist, believing that a creator made the natural world and then let it run on its own. As a result, Jefferson did not believe in "superstition" and especially miracles. However, he did believe in morality and ethics, and was concerned that most Christians cared more for the sacrifice of Jesus than his words. As a result, he simply cut all the miracles from the Gospels. Being the scholar that he was, he then compared all of the words of Jesus in four different languages. While many contemporary Protestant and Catholic Christians do not accept Unitarianism as being Christianity, some early Presidents were Unitarian, believing that Jesus was not necessarily divine. One such was the sixth: John Quincy Adams. He did, however, believe in the importance of the Bible and wanted to help spread biblical literacy, and he was involved in the American Bible Society at its founding. Maybe because of his chosen denomination, he chose not to swear on the Bible, and instead used the Constitution. The irony of swearing into office on the Bible is that the Bible discourages it.

19th Century America and the Bible

The 19th Century was a chaotic time in America. After the American Revolution, many Americans were taken with the idea that the United States was chosen by God. It had to be if it defeated the Divine Right monarch of Britain. Religious exploration and patriotism united and new religious

movements began to spread. Joseph Smith believed that America was the new Israel, but more than that, he felt persecuted in many of the places his people went. When he ran for President in 1844, he hoped that the Latter-Day Saints church could support a candidate they trust, but also that the public would see Mormons in a better light. He was especially concerned for his flock that lived in Missouri, where their lives had been threatened and their property seized. His campaign ended abruptly when he was killed in Illinois, and America did not truly accept a Mormon candidate until Mitt Romney was nominated by the Republicans in 2012. In 1861, Abraham Lincoln became President before the chaos of the 19th century erupted in the apocalyptic Civil War, and he is another President whose religion is disputed. Although he was raised Baptist, he never seemed to join the church. However, he had an extensive knowledge of the Bible, and his life and presidency were full of tragedy and trying issues. Scholars are unsure if the Civil War and the death of his children turned him toward or away from religion. Regardless, he owned books like the devotional seen in this case, and he frequently appealed to religious sentiments and the Bible in his speeches, such as with the Gettysburg Address.

Hoover and FDR

Debate swirls around how devout President Herbert Hoover was. Like many other Protestants, he was a supporter of Prohibition, and legend says that as a Quaker, he would not swear on the Bible; however, old recordings of his inauguration prove otherwise. What we do know, is that Hoover refused to sign a Bible for the Quayle Bible Collection. It seems that he felt such an act was disrespectful or even irreverent, as seen in his letter to Hattie Osborne. However, he did send a Bible that was given to him that had his name printed in it. Is this the proof that Hoover was more devout Quaker than some scholars

believe? Like Hoover, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's religious belief is not a certainty. He was a lifelong Episcopalian and he frequented church services; however, he did not always appeal to the Bible in speeches like Presidents before him, such as Woodrow Wilson. However, there are two instances where he emphasizes the belief of others. In a "Fireside Chat" in 1934 he mentions that belief (of all religions) unites people together as humans. In another instance, he approved that his signature be put on military-issued Bibles, knowing the importance that a Bible signed by the President would hold for soldiers fighting in World War II. The message written in the front of the Bible again suggests that he emphasizes the importance of believers of all religions.

Truman and Eisenhower

Both President Truman and President Eisenhower hailed from a relatively close distance to Baker. For whatever reason, Harry S. Truman wrote extensively to the Quayle Bible Collection and to Baker President William Scarborough. In the letters, he often asked questions about Bible translations and the history of biblical editions. His Bible is the first one that was signed and sent to the Quayle, which started our tradition of collecting signed Bibles. The very worn Bible was his personal copy. In the front cover, he highlights Exodus 20 and Matthew 5:6-7 as the "code" all should live by. Exodus 20 is the Ten Commandments. The Matthew passage is from the Beatitudes that bless the hungry, those that thirst, and the merciful. Dwight D. Eisenhower's Bible is an interesting one. It has led many visitors to the Quayle to speculate that he was a Mason. However, looking at the date stamp in the text he had not long received this Bible from Colorado before he signed it and sent it to us. Unlike Truman (to our knowledge), Eisenhower did not have a formal relationship with the Quayle. As more fully explained on the north wall, Eisenhower did have an interesting religious background

that led him to make two of the more controversial religious decisions made by a President of the 20th century.

JFK and LBJ

Many of the Presidents were sent Bibles to sign. Some signed whatever Bible they had on hand. John F. Kennedy hand selected his copy to sign for us. The Knox Bible edition was an updated translation of the Latin Vulgate published in 1950. As the first Catholic President of the United States, President Kennedy used translations of the Latin Bible like this one. Lyndon B. Johnson, who succeeded JFK, was a member of the Disciples of Christ. In order to secure his signature, the Quayle Bible Collection initially reached out to President Truman, considering both were Democrats. However, President Johnson eagerly signed the Bible for us on the National Day of Prayer. He was one of the first Presidents to sign on this day.

Nixon and Ford

Like Herbert Hoover, Richard M. Nixon was a Quaker, and a much Hoover, there is a debate on how much this influenced his presidency. In the 70s, Nixon saw a rise of religious leaders who were aligning themselves with politics. These leaders, such as Jerry Falwell and Billy Graham, saw many of the social issues of America as moral and religious ones. Nixon used Billy Graham to secure the support of people that would become the “religious right.” Like Johnson, the signature for Nixon’s Bible was secured during the National Day of Prayer. This tradition was set originally by Harry S. Truman in 1952. Although it has been questioned by some, it continued to be a tradition even to today. With the COVID-19 global pandemic, President Trump was unable to hold a reception. As a result, he issued a proclamation seen here. Gerald Ford’s Bible was signed in June 1976. It was delivered to him by Larry Winn Jr., a Republican

Representative from Kansas. Gerald Ford's Bible is one of few for which we have a photograph of the actual signing event.

Carter and Reagan

Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan are two of the more religiously charged presidents of the US. Jimmy Carter was one of the more devout presidents, and drew on the Bible for many of his policies as President and as a humanitarian after his presidency. For his humanitarian work, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002. Like Ford, he is one of the few Presidents that we have a photo signing the Bible. To get Carter's signature, the Quayle Bible Collection reached out to the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta and Larry Winn Jr. Following Nixon's example, Ronald Reagan appealed to the rising Evangelical population in the United States. Aligning himself with the President, Jerry Falwell declared that a large part of the population believed in strict morals. These people were the "Moral Majority" who supported Reagan's policies that did not stray from a strict conservative Christian belief. This would affect the way Reagan dealt with the AIDS crisis and the "War on Drugs."

Bush and Clinton

George H. W. Bush was raised as an Episcopalian, but many have speculated that he became an Evangelical later in life. Like Carter, Bush's Christianity may have come out in his emphasis of social humanitarian work. In his "Thousand Points of Light" speech, he emphasizes that Americans should volunteer and support the needy. At his death, Bush's son, President George W. Bush, invoked this speech proclaiming that his father was the brightest of those points. Although he was a Southern Baptist, Bill Clinton was not seen as the most religious president by many Evangelicals. Like his predecessors, Clinton's religious sentiments may have come out more so in his humanitarian

work. The Clinton administration and later Clinton foundation worked heavily to stop religious conflict throughout the world. In order to secure Bill Clinton's signature, the Quayle Bible Collection had to appeal to John Carlin, a former governor of Kansas and the National Archivist during Clinton's presidency.

W. and O.

Like Reagan and Nixon, George W. Bush appealed heavily to Evangelicals in his campaign and presidency. However, he probably is not an Evangelical himself, but instead appealed to these sentiments for political support. Raised an Episcopalian, Bush became a Methodist after marrying. Faced with two of the largest disasters Americans had seen for many years, 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, Bush appealed to religion and the Bible to unite the country, much like his message seen here on this signed Bible. However, in an increasing religiously diverse country with a rising secular population, this appeal fell on many deaf ears. On the other hand, President Barack Obama felt heavy religious scrutiny when he ran for president. Given his father's background and their life in Indonesia, mentioned in this case, many Evangelical Christians believed he was a Muslim, regardless of his church affiliation in Chicago. With this controversy, he was hesitant to sign a Bible for the Quayle Collection. He feared it would be used as a political statement or be sold. As a result, it took four years for him to sign the book. However, he agreed considering the significance the King James Bible had on the history of the world, the history of America, and the history of the Presidency.

For Further Reading

Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers. Daniel Dreisbach. (2016)

The Religious Beliefs of America's Founders: Reason, Revelation, and Revolution. Gregg L. Frazer. (2014)

Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power. Jon Meacham. (2013)

No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith. Fawn M. Brodie. (1995)

Eisenhower in War and Peace. Jean Edward Smith (2012).

Nixon's First Cover-up: The Religious Life of a Quaker President. H. Larry Ingle. (2015)

God in the White House: A History of How Faith Shaped the Presidency from John F. Kennedy to George W. Bush. Randall Balmer. (2009)

With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America. William Martin. (2005)

The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America. Frances Fitzgerald. (2019)

Faith: A Journey for All. Jimmy Carter. (2018)

To Visit:

Drop in for a visit between 1:00 pm and 4:00 pm any Saturday or Sunday. To arrange for a visit at another time or for a group tour, please call the number below. Due to the ongoing pandemic, all visitors must wear masks and social distancing is required, as per the Baker University COVID-19 policy.

You may want to consider visiting other sites in Baldwin City such as the Osborne Chapel, the Holt-Russell Gallery, the Old Castle Museum, or the Lumberyard Arts Center.

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