

AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM
VOLUME II: RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES
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Supplementary Material

Chapter 8: The New Deal/Great Society Era—Individual Rights/Religion

Franklin D. Roosevelt, D-Day Prayer (1944)

President Franklin Roosevelt renewed the tradition of presidents leading the nation in prayer at his inauguration. He closed his First Inaugural Address by declaring, “[i]n this dedication of a nation we humbly ask the blessing of God. May He protect each and every one of us! May He guide me in the days to come!” During World War II, Roosevelt urged Americans to read their Bible daily from Thanksgiving to Christmas. At no point did he find any inconsistency with his revival of religious rhetoric and his public exhortations for religious freedom.

Roosevelt’s most famous prayer was uttered on D-Day, June 6, 1944. Consider as you read the excerpt below whether this is best described as a nonsectarian or sectarian prayer. Does the president have any constitutional obligations with respect to prayer or may a presidential address include the same prayer an ordinary citizen might say? Does the prayer below suggest any particular place for religion in the New Deal order or is this best considered as an idiosyncratic element of Roosevelt’s leadership style?

My 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.

...

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

...

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.

...

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 arrogances. 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.