

Religion and Politics

By Mel Lavine

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Rick Santorum is making a case for religion in public life. He declared that he does not believe “in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute.”

In fact, Santorum, a Catholic, said that he felt like “throwing up” after reading the speech John F. Kennedy, delivered in 1960, pledging strict separation of religion and politics. Kennedy did become president, and the first Catholic elected to the office.

Since Santorum and other Republican aspirants to the presidency have made an issue of

religion in politics, I thought it might be interesting to know what role religion played in the lives of some, if not all, of the big names in our history. The quotations are taken from "The Complete Book of U.S. Presidents" by William A. Degregorio, Wings Books, 1993.

George Washington 1st President: "Episcopalian. However, religion played only a minor role in his life. He fashioned a moral code based on his own sense of right and wrong and adhered to it rigidly."

Thomas Jefferson 3rd President: "Jefferson grew up an Anglican, but from early adulthood professed faith in a Creator uninvolved in the affairs of this world. He relied on precepts, but he had little use for the church itself."

Andrew Jackson 7th President: "Presbyterian. Although not especially religious, Jackson was not the heathen many churchmen believed him to be. He frequently skipped Sunday services... but he also enjoyed reading the Bible and considered himself a practicing Christian."

Abraham Lincoln 16th President: "Although his father and stepmother belonged to a Baptist church, Lincoln never formally joined. In Springfield (Illinois) and Washington, he attended Presbyterian service. Lincoln acknowledged that he belonged to no church but wrote 'I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion, in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular.'"

Woodrow Wilson 28th President: "Presbyterian. 'My life,' he said, 'would not be worth living if it were not for the driving power of religion, for faith, pure and simple....' In the White House he read the Bible daily, said grace before meals, and prayed on his knees each morning and night."

Theodore Roosevelt 26th President: "Dutch Reformed... A firm believer in separation of church and state, he considered it both unconstitutional and sacrilegious to stamp In God We Trust on U.S. coins and as president tried unsuccessfully to have the legend removed."

Franklin D. Roosevelt 32nd President: "Episcopalian. Rarely spoke about his faith. His wife and others close to him maintained that he believed in God and divine guidance but had little patience for complex dogma. He was well versed in the Bible and believed that a succinct guide to life could be found in the Sermon on the Mount."

Ronald Reagan 40th President: "Disciple of Christ, Presbyterian. Reagan often expressed deep faith in God but as president rarely attended Sunday services. He believed in a divine plan in which everything happens for the best. Yet he also believed in free will."

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