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## **Religious Myths and the American Creed in the Inaugural Addresses of American Presidents, 1789–2013**

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# 1. Introduction

Despite the triumphs of science and rational thinking since the Age of Enlightenment, myths have retained their crucial role in Western thought until today. This holds particularly true with regard to the American continent, which, since its discovery, has kept human imagination in suspense unlike any other part of the world. As Dan Diner points out, “the discovery of America resembled a founding act. The world appeared to be created anew from that moment on, to the extent that it had to be rethought.”<sup>1</sup> This is exemplified by a quote from the Spanish historian Francisco Lopez de Gomara who concluded in 1552 concerning the significance of the discovery of the New World, “The greatest event since the creation of the world (excluding the incarnation and death of Him who created it), is the discovery of the Indies.”<sup>2</sup> 140 years later, John Locke struck the same chord when he proclaimed that “in the beginning all the world was America.”<sup>3</sup>

So Europeans equated America with a pristine and untouched state of nature, and thus the new continent in the West represented for them a counter-world to civilized Europe as well as a screen “upon which to project all the images and metaphors arising from its contrast to Europe.”<sup>4</sup> For this reason, it is hardly surprising that, for instance, the legend of El Dorado, “a country of abundant and almost inexhaustible gold,”<sup>5</sup> fueled Spanish expansionist aspirations in the New World from their very inception. Christopher Columbus, on the other hand, upon his arrival on the island of Española in the West Indies, was convinced that he had discovered the biblical paradise of the Garden of Eden,<sup>6</sup> while Juan Ponce de Leon unsuccessfully sought the proverbial Fountain of Youth in Florida.<sup>7</sup> Echoing the Old Testament’s description of the Israelites’ Promised Land, Europeans also imagined America as a New Canaan and referred to the new continent as “the land of milk and honey.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, the New World represented the place where the ancient biblical prophecies would be fulfilled and the vices of the Old World be redeemed. Furthermore, the mythic concept of

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<sup>1</sup> Diner, *America in the Eyes of the Germans*, 4.

<sup>2</sup> translated and quoted in *Elliott*, *The Old World and the New*, 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Locke*, *Two Treatises of Government*, 228f.

<sup>4</sup> Diner, *America in the Eyes of the Germans*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Sanchez*, «El Dorado» and the Myth of the Golden Fleece, 339.

<sup>6</sup> see *Hutchins*, *Inventing Eden*, 13f.

<sup>7</sup> see *Fisher*, *The Supply and Demand Paradox*, 63.

<sup>8</sup> see *Norton et al.*, *A People and a Nation*, 341.

*translatio imperii*, the belief in the westward progression of empire, which included the notion that “civilization was always carried forward by a single dominant power or people and that historical succession was a matter of westward movement,”<sup>9</sup> ensured that America carried an even stronger mythic charge. A similar effect on the perception of the New World was brought about by the apocalyptic model of the four monarchies, described in various chapters in the Book of Daniel, which was “allegorically interpreted as God’s plan to have world dominance shift three times”<sup>10</sup> between four different world powers before moving on one more time to establish the fifth and final world empire. Combining both theories, the Anglo-Irish bishop and philosopher George Berkeley, in 1726, joined many other intellectuals in proclaiming that world history would culminate in America:

Westward the course of empire takes its way;  
The first four acts already past,  
A fifth shall close the drama with the day;  
Time’s noblest offspring is the last.<sup>11</sup>

These are only a few examples of the diverse conglomeration of myths associated with the New World. In conclusion, it remains to be said that as soon as Europeans had learnt about the existence of a new land in the West, an aura of exceptionalism was attached to the American continent. What is actually even more intriguing is that subsequently the United States was able to claim all these myths, which used to be directed at the entire continent, exclusively for itself. As a consequence, no other country has stirred up the fantasies of people all over the globe like the United States since the Declaration of Independence was drafted in 1776.

None of this is to say, of course, that other countries and their respective histories are not surrounded by and imbued with myths. However, while every nation has amassed its fair share of mythic narratives, events, images, and places, no other country is characterized by a similarly dense jungle of myths, which penetrates American history as well as the perception of the United States by other nations and their citizens. This is also shown by the polarizing potential of the United States of

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<sup>9</sup> *Dovell*, *Interaction of the Classical Traditions of Literature and Politics*, 37.

<sup>10</sup> *Frank*, *Transatlantic Responses*, 214.

<sup>11</sup> *Berkeley*, *On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America*, 70f [not printed until 1752].

America as a theme and concept as well as by the emotional charge of discussions associated with this complex issue. America unleashes desires and triggers dreams of wealth, freedom, and a better life in an egalitarian society, which provides every individual with a fair chance to fulfill his or her aspirations.

At the same time, however, a deep-seated aversion to the United States, based on traditional negative stereotypes, has been a widespread attitude for centuries, especially among Europeans. As Thomas Fröschl explains, although manifestations of a latent anti-Americanism have existed in Europe since the discovery of the New World, it was during the Age of the Enlightenment that this “European critique of America”<sup>12</sup> developed into full-fledged anti-Americanism. This antagonism against America was carried by famous philosophers, scientists, and intellectuals, and was initially directed against the entire continent.<sup>13</sup> According to European scholars such as Voltaire, Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, or Abbé Raynal, European nature was supreme and superior, while the American land mass as well as its flora and fauna were considered backward, inferior, and degenerate. After the United States had become the lone target for European resentment, the same claim was made about Americans and their culture. In addition to this, other allegations were put forward, such as that the United States lacked a “real” civilization,<sup>14</sup> and was neither able to attain perfection of any kind, nor to produce, what Raynal called, “a man of genius.”<sup>15</sup> Naturally, American political leaders and intellectuals such as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and John Adams fiercely rejected this and took a stand against the vilification of their nation, continent, and compatriots, leveled by the European elite. However, despite the fact that they countered and refuted these accusations by putting forth, what Washington deemed to be, “incontestable facts,”<sup>16</sup> their efforts proved to be largely unsuccessful and in vain, as anti-American sentiment continued to flourish on the other side of the Atlantic.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, America also served as “the ideal scapegoat for the general process of alienation,”<sup>18</sup> which accompanied the flux and upheaval of “ruthlessly advancing

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<sup>12</sup> Fröschl, *Historical Roots of European Anti-Americanism*, 60.

<sup>13</sup> see Roger, *Aufklärer gegen Amerika*, 16-18.

<sup>14</sup> see Arnold, *Civilization in the United States*, 172-192.

<sup>15</sup> see Jefferson, *Writings*, 190.

<sup>16</sup> Washington, *The Papers of George Washington*, 298.

<sup>17</sup> see Fröschl, *Historical Roots of European Anti-Americanism*, 62-64.

<sup>18</sup> Diner, *America in the Eyes of the Germans*, 6.



modernity”<sup>19</sup> during Europe’s fin-de-siècle era, since Europeans perceived the United States as the beacon of modernity and very embodiment of materialism and mechanization. Subsequently, anti-Americanism also lost none of its appeal during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In fact, the contrary was true, as failed military interventions (such as Vietnam, Lebanon, or Somalia) and George W. Bush’s global “War on Terror,” which culminated in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, further fueled anti-American sentiment. Thus, the boundaries between legitimate criticism and anti-American bias are still blurred today and the United States are frequently identified as the cause for all the negative tendencies and developments in an increasingly globalized industrial world. For Andrei S. Markovits, anti-American attitudes, which used to be more or less restricted to European elites in the eighteenth and nineteenth century,<sup>20</sup> have “mutated into a sort of global antinomy, a mutually shared language of opposition to and resistance against the real and perceived ills of modernity that are now inextricably identified solely with America.”<sup>21</sup>

So the bipolarity between affection and repulsion towards the United States has been brought about by the existence and interplay of positive fantasies about America and various forms of rampant anti-Americanism. Both types of myths about the United States comprise traditional stereotypes, prejudices, clichés, images, and long refuted assertions, which transcend reality as well as historical facts. Thus, it has been possible for America to represent, on the one hand, the “cradle of liberty,”<sup>22</sup> the “asylum of the oppressed,”<sup>23</sup> the “embodiment of democratic ideals,”<sup>24</sup> the “land of boundless opportunities,”<sup>25</sup> and the aforementioned Promised Land, while simultaneously being demonized as “a materialistic Mammon, an industrial Moloch,”<sup>26</sup> and a “rapaciously individualistic, violent, selfish, ignorant, and philistine”<sup>27</sup> country. Other negative connotations frequently attached to the United States picture it as an imperialistic,

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<sup>19</sup> *Diner*, *America in the Eyes of the Germans*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> see *Spiro*, *Anti-Americanism in Western Europe*, 124.

<sup>21</sup> *Markovits*, *Uncouth Nation*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> *Johnson*, *Ethics and Counterrevolution*, 98.

<sup>23</sup> *Allen*, *A Republic in Time*, 78.

<sup>24</sup> *Peters*, *Society on the Run*, xiv.

<sup>25</sup> *Kupper*, *Translating Yellowstone*, 132.

<sup>26</sup> *Friedman*, *Rethinking Anti-Americanism*, 8.

<sup>27</sup> *Singh*, *Are we all Americans now?*, 28.

superficial, exploitive, hypocritical, and overly religious nation, which acts as the world's self-appointed policeman.

What is striking in this respect is that the ambivalence towards America concerns people from all walks of life who are both infatuated with and hostile towards the mythic images of the United States conjured up by their own imaginations. No class of society, no professional group, no age band, not even intellectual discourse can be declared not liable to experience these contradictory sentiments towards America.

For an example of the zigzag course of many non-Americans towards the United States, one only needs to cast a glance at Obama's first presidential candidacy and the preceding two terms of the Bush administration, which perfectly illustrate this ambivalence. In 2007 and 2008, the world witnessed exciting political days when the hitherto little known Senator Barack Obama from Illinois kindled a startling enthusiasm around the world, dubbed as "Obamania," which sometimes even bordered fanaticism. Not only in America but even here in Europe, the future first black president of the United States managed, simply through his rhetoric, to restore the belief in the American Dream and in the U.S. as a place where all things are possible. Ironically, the years right before the 2008 presidential election had been just the reverse and had been characterized by a global anti-Americanism and an outright hostility towards the United States on an unprecedented scale. In the wake of the September 11 attacks and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, anti-American resentment had clearly crossed the boundaries of legitimate criticism and had even surpassed the aversion to America during the Vietnam War while everybody had been "joining in the ever louder chorus of the anti-Americans."<sup>28</sup>

However, dreams, ideals, and myths have not only been projected upon the United States from outside. Also the American self-image is permeated by a complex of interrelated myths of remarkable diversity and vitality. Contrary to the ambivalent perceptions of the United States by other nations, these narratives, imaginations, and connotations naturally cast the country in an exclusively positive light. In addition, these affirmative myths take on an important role in creating a distinctly American identity and are deeply embedded in the collective consciousness of the nation. As

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<sup>28</sup> *Markovits, Uncouth Nation, 3.*

Anne-Marie Slaughter points out, “America is a place, a country, a people, but also an idea. [...] It is the idea of a nation bound together not by territory or religion or ethnicity but by a self-conscious commitment to shared values.”<sup>29</sup> This notion is accompanied by the American self-image as the greatest country on the face of the earth and leading light for others.

The political discourse is rife with examples of this firm belief of Americans. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, identified the United States as “the world’s best hope,”<sup>30</sup> while Ronald Reagan, referencing John Winthrop’s biblical metaphor, described his country as “a shining city upon a hill whose beacon light guides freedom-loving people everywhere.”<sup>31</sup> The conviction that this special nation, moreover, has a special mission was already voiced by George Washington in his first inaugural address in 1789, when he proclaimed that “the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered, perhaps, as deeply, as finally, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.”<sup>32</sup>

The foundation of the concept of America as the great exception among the world’s countries and as a “chosen” nation had already been laid by the Pilgrims<sup>33</sup> and Puritans, who settled in America during the first half of the seventeenth century and each founded their own colony in what are today the states of Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maine, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Vermont. They established the idea of America as a shining role model and country with a special destiny, since they thought of themselves as the new Israelites<sup>34</sup> and connected their mission on the new continent to “the biblical image of a ‘City Upon a Hill’ that would set an example before the world.”<sup>35</sup> According to Robert N. Bellah, early Americans “saw themselves on a divinely appointed ‘errand into the wilderness’ with profound personal, ecclesiastical, and world-historical meaning.”<sup>36</sup> This vision and its ideological implications have shaped and continue to influence the self-perception of Americans and their country’s idealistic principles embodied in the pantheon of American

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<sup>29</sup> *Slaughter*, *The Idea that is America*, 1f.

<sup>30</sup> *Jefferson*, *First Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1801.

<sup>31</sup> *Reagan*, *Farewell Address to the Nation*, January 11, 1989.

<sup>32</sup> *Washington*, *First Inaugural Address*, April 30, 1789.

<sup>33</sup> This group is also known under the term *Separatists*.

<sup>34</sup> see *Elazar*, *Covenant and Constitutionalism*, 18.

<sup>35</sup> *Doyle & Van Young*, *Independence and Nationalism in the Americas*, 99.

<sup>36</sup> *Bellah*, *The Broken Covenant*, 11f.

sacrosanct documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

The fact that the consequent vigor and significance of American imagery and ideals can even amaze and surprise a distinguished expert in the field of American Studies from a neighboring country is shown by Sacvan Bercovitch's<sup>37</sup> astonishment about America's pervasive mythic identity, which he experienced first-hand during his first lengthy visit to the U.S. in the 1960s:

My first encounter with American consensus was in the late sixties, when I crossed the border into the United States and found myself inside the myth of America. Not of North America, for the myth stopped short of the Canadian and Mexican borders, but of a country that despite its arbitrary frontiers, despite its bewildering mix of race and creed, could believe in something called the True America, and could invest that patent fiction with all the moral and emotional appeal of a religious symbol. [...] Here was the Jewish anarchist Paul Goodman berating the Midwest for abandoning the promise; here the descendant of American slaves, Martin Luther King, denouncing injustice as a violation of the American way; here, an endless debate about national destiny, [...] conservatives scavenging for un-Americans, New Left historians recalling the country to its sacred mission. Nothing in my Canadian background had prepared me for this spectacle.<sup>38</sup>

The secular-religious bond that is described by Bercovitch in this quote and that is allegedly shared by all Americans, regardless of their birthplace and ethnic background, is also known as the American creed, a term popularized by Gunnar Myrdal<sup>39</sup> and Martin Seymour Lipset who hereby “reiterated Ralph Waldo Emerson<sup>40</sup> and Abraham Lincoln's<sup>41</sup> emphases on the country's ‘political religion’”<sup>42</sup> which Lipset defined as a national ideology that “includes a set of dogmas about the nature of a good society.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> an eminent Canadian scholar who is currently holding a professorship in American Literature at Harvard University

<sup>38</sup> *Bercovitch, The Rites of Assent*, 5f.

<sup>39</sup> *Myrdal, An American Dilemma*.

<sup>40</sup> see *Bush, Emerson, John Brown, and “Doing the Word.”*

<sup>41</sup> see *Lincoln, Address Before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, IL, January 27, 1838.*

<sup>42</sup> *Lipset, American Exceptionalism*, 18.

<sup>43</sup> *Lipset, American Exceptionalism*, 31.

Other influential scholars such as Robert N. Bellah have also referred to Americans' shared belief as a "civil religion."<sup>44</sup>

Around the same time of Bercovitch's first prolonged trip to the United States, the American historian Henry Steele Commager identified the range and density of allegedly prototypical American myths, which caught Bercovitch off-guard, as the reason why "it took a thousand essays to penetrate to the truth about America."<sup>45</sup> Concerning the quantity of publications, Commager definitely had a point, since, at the time when he uttered that statement in 1967, the topic had already attracted a great deal of scientific interest, and a multitude of scholars and intellectuals had, in fact, set out on the venture to "penetrate to the truth" about the United States. The question, however, remained whether they had also been successful in accomplishing this end. Regardless of the answer, extensive research has continued in this field to date. As a result, we have a number of books at our disposal today, which provide critical and in-depth analyses of the many variants of America as an intellectual construct. Especially Richard Slotkin,<sup>46</sup> Jack P. Greene,<sup>47</sup> and Walter A. McDougall,<sup>48</sup> as well as the aforementioned Bellah,<sup>49</sup> Bercovitch,<sup>50</sup> Myrdal,<sup>51</sup> and Lipset,<sup>52</sup> have made particularly valuable contributions to this field of scientific inquiry.

Considering the meticulous research on the topic by numerous distinguished experts, it would not make much sense to follow suit and write another ontological account about, for instance, the idea of the American Dream, the principles underlying the American creed, the American West as a mythic place of freedom and individuality, or the relation between the nation's self-conception as God's chosen people and its belief in the Manifest Destiny of Americans. Yet, what has hitherto not been taken into consideration<sup>53</sup> is that myths are mutable, since they do not hold objective factual

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<sup>44</sup> see *Bellah*, *Civil Religion in America*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> *Commager*, *The Search for a Usable Past*, 183.

<sup>46</sup> *Slotkin*, *Regeneration Through Violence*; *Slotkin*, *The Fatal Environment*; *Slotkin*, *Gunfighter Nation*.

<sup>47</sup> *Greene*, *The Intellectual Construction of America*.

<sup>48</sup> *McDougall*, *Promised Land, Crusader State*.

<sup>49</sup> *Bellah*, *The Broken Covenant*.

<sup>50</sup> *Bercovitch*, *The Typology of America's Mission*; *Bercovitch*, *The Rites of Assent*.

<sup>51</sup> *Myrdal*, *An American Dilemma*.

<sup>52</sup> *Lipset*, *The First New Nation*; *Lipset*, *American Exceptionalism*.

<sup>53</sup> except by Vanessa Beasley, whose book *You, the People*, however, serves a different purpose than my thesis, since it focuses on the construction of American nationhood and national identity in presidential speeches

validity. As Vanessa B. Beasley explains, they are “abstract concepts”<sup>54</sup> and as such “can change in meaning across time, circumstance, or audiences.”<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, myths need to be articulated in order to actually exist. Put in another way, “ideals and beliefs [...] do not simply fall from the sky or [...] rise up from the ground; they are a product of human interaction.”<sup>56</sup>

Academic authors such as Bercovitch and others cited above have so far focused on the mythic American narratives and ideals themselves, while a profound analysis of how they are actually explained and invoked within the United States has yet to be made. Thus, this master’s thesis intends to adopt a more pragmatic approach and to hopefully add a new dimension to the academic discussion by exploring how American myths are shared, communicated, and legitimized by Americans themselves. In order to achieve this objective, I have examined all fifty-seven inaugural addresses of U.S. presidents, delivered between 1789 and 2013. Drawing upon samples and quotations from this special type of presidential speech, I originally intended to analyze how all of the prototypical American myths and elements of the American creed have been utilized and interpreted in the rhetoric of presidents. However, it soon became evident that any such endeavor would far exceed the scope of a master’s thesis. Thus, it became necessary to narrow down the focus of discussion. Since the American creed and the diverse conglomeration of myths surrounding the United States have been heavily influenced and penetrated by religion, as Samuel P. Huntington, among others, has pointed out,<sup>57</sup> I have decided to make the religious myths and the underlying religious dimension of the American creed the core area of this thesis. In addition to this, the second main subject of investigation will be the shared values and principles which constitute the foundation of the American creed.

As legions of scholars have outlined, the United States as a nation was founded on a commitment to shared values. Gunnar Myrdal, in his groundbreaking book *An American Dilemma*, termed the commitment of Americans to these beliefs the American creed and identified the ideals of liberty, equality, individualism, and justice

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<sup>54</sup> Beasley, *The Rhetoric of Ideological Consensus in the United States*, 173.

<sup>55</sup> Beasley, *The Rhetoric of Ideological Consensus in the United States*, 173.

<sup>56</sup> Beasley, *The Rhetoric of Ideological Consensus in the United States*, 174.

<sup>57</sup> see Huntington, *Who Are We?*, 66-69.

as its main constituents.<sup>58</sup> Since this set of values, which forms “the cement in the structure”<sup>59</sup> of the heterogeneous American nation, is the product of the “profound influence” which “liberal Protestantism and political liberalism, democratic religion and democratic politics, American faith and Christian faith [...] exerted [...] upon each other,”<sup>60</sup> this study would not be complete without an investigation of the manners in which American presidents have discussed these ideals in inaugural addresses. Since space restrictions prevent a comprehensive individual analysis of the various principles and values encapsulated in the American creed, they will be examined collectively. The objective thereby is to find and uncover commonalities as well as habitual tendencies and conventions in the ways American presidents have presented these ideals in their inaugural speeches.

Concerning the religious myths and the religious dimension of the American creed, it is my goal to not only discuss which political actors have promoted the various types of religiously inspired mythic concepts and the ways in which this has happened, but I also aim to uncover changes, developments, and abundance patterns of these myths within the oratorical tradition of inaugural addresses. Another primary goal is to identify constant elements, structured regularities, and breaks in what is being said or represented. In other words, the thesis seeks to provide answers to the following questions: Which religious myths can be found in the speeches? When do these mythic components occur for the first time? When do they disappear (if they do so at all)? How have they been developed within the inaugural genre? Where are the continuities and/or breaks in the utilization of these mythic elements? Can accumulations and clusters of such myths be found? Which functions do these myths fulfill in the inaugural addresses? And concerning the principles and values encapsulated in the American creed: How have American presidents presented these ideals in their inaugural speeches? And can common practices and customs be found in the ways these values have been discussed in presidential inaugurals?

In this respect, it needs to be pointed out that these details and peculiarities, such as a potentially heightened incidence of a particular type of myth over a certain period

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<sup>58</sup> see *Myrdal, An American Dilemma*, xlviii & 4.

<sup>59</sup> *Myrdal, An American Dilemma*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> *Miller, Religion and Political Attitudes*, 98f.

of time, can only be historically explained and contextualized in this study if the explanation can be revealed through the content of the respective inaugural address(es).

Having expounded the aims of this study and why it should constitute a new and fruitful approach, this still leaves us with the question why, of all political speeches, presidential inaugural addresses have been chosen as objects of investigation. Apart from the fact that inaugural addresses have so far received very little scholarly attention, they are unique and thus ideal for this research for two reasons. First, the historical continuity of presidential inaugurals is without equal and has yielded a corpus that lends itself ideally to comparison. Back in 1789, when George Washington established this rhetorical tradition, which from then on would recur on a four-year circle as a fixture of the presidential inaugural ceremony, the “very idea of an inaugural address was revolutionary.”<sup>61</sup> While the rest of the world was dominated by monarchies, and monarchs “certainly do not speak at coronations,”<sup>62</sup> President Washington laid the foundation for “an unusually American, unusually durable form of oratory.”<sup>63</sup>

This leads us to the second reason: According to rhetorical critics, inaugural addresses, due to their epideictic and ritualistic nature, constitute a distinct form of presidential discourse.<sup>64</sup> Compared to other types of speeches by the country’s chief political actor, inaugural addresses are the least policy-driven of them all. Their contents transcend everyday political issues, partisanship, and, to a certain extent, also the political agenda of the respective president. The preceding, usually hotly contested election campaign, characterized by partisan squabbles and politicking, combined with the newly elected president’s desire to promote unity and harmony, induce the most important political leader “to offer civic ideologies, or myths of civic identity, that foster the requisite sense of peoplehood,”<sup>65</sup> in his inaugural address. However, as “mythic discourses”<sup>66</sup> and “public meditations on national values and identity,”<sup>67</sup> presidential inaugurals are not only designed, as Kennedy’s speechwriter Ted Sorensen stresses, “to address the American people of our time but [also] have meaning for all the

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<sup>61</sup> *Widmer*, *So Help Me God*, 31.

<sup>62</sup> *Widmer*, *So Help Me God*, 31.

<sup>63</sup> *Widmer*, *So Help Me God*, 34.

<sup>64</sup> see *Campbell & Jamieson*, *Inaugurating the Presidency*, 394-396.

<sup>65</sup> *Smith*, *Civic Ideals*, 6.

<sup>66</sup> *Beasley*, *The Rhetoric of Ideological Consensus in the United States*, 175.

<sup>67</sup> *Campbell & Jamieson*, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 334.



people for all time. For they embody the best of our heritage from the past and the best of our hopes for the future.”<sup>68</sup> Since presidents are certainly aware of this fact, especially since World War II, they prepare their inaugural addresses with extreme care. And when Inauguration Day finally arrives, every president, for the period of his respective speech, not only acts as chief political actor but also adopts the role of raconteur, as Ted Widmer notes:

More than mere politicians, they were storytellers, each writing a narrative that improved upon his predecessor’s. It’s a surprisingly common urge to go back to the beginning. Instead of saying simply, “I have been elected president and these are my plans for the next four years,” most said something like, “Because I’ve been elected, I’m going to tell you the story of democracy, and why America is the greatest country.”<sup>69</sup>

Consequently, the genre of inaugural addresses is not only unique for its longevity, but also for its thematic continuity. Nowhere else do contemporary heads of state still follow the example of their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors and refer to constitutional principles as well as to the Founding Fathers and other important historical figures of their countries in their inaugural speeches. Thus, we “can learn much from the American example, particularly when it comes to the myths that support the collective existence of a nation,” Susan-Mary Grant argues and adds, “America is closer to the past than many of the older, European nations.”<sup>70</sup>

For all the discussed characteristics of inaugural addresses, they lend themselves perfectly to this sort of research, examining the influence that American myths and ideals have exerted on this genre of presidential speech. In this respect, it needs to be emphasized that these myths are not only significant and instructive concerning American self-perceptions, but also regarding the ways in which different presidents want their fellow countrymen to view themselves. As Beasley explains, “presidential discourse teaches American culture to its listeners,” but presidents eventually take it a step further and “obviously do more than just affirm cultural beliefs through their inaugural addresses [...]. They may also try to shape and even change them.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *Sorensen, Kennedy*, 245.

<sup>69</sup> *Widmer, So Help Me God*, 35.

<sup>70</sup> *Grant, Making History*, 89.

<sup>71</sup> *Beasley, The Rhetoric of Ideological Consensus in the United States*, 175.

Moreover, inaugural addresses not only shed light on how Americans see and, according to their incumbent president, ought to see themselves, but also on how they wish to be regarded by the rest of the world. This holds especially true for inaugural speeches held after World War II. In this sense, presidential inaugurals serve as a medium through which mythic and idealized images of the United States are exported around the globe.

Whether the respective president has composed his inaugural address himself, or whether he has received help by a speechwriter, is not relevant for this study. Since by delivering the speech, the president establishes a connection between himself and the uttered content, which he epitomizes in further consequence.

Before the actual case study on religious myths and principles of the American creed in presidential inaugural addresses is presented, the following chapter will devote its attention to some of the terms and concepts used throughout this thesis. Apart from carefully defining them, the main aim of this chapter is to provide the necessary background information concerning these terms for the rest of the paper.

The main part will then shift the discussion to the occurrences of various religiously inspired mythic ideals in inaugural addresses. To begin with, an analysis of how religious influences have shaped American self-conception as well as the country's political sphere will be used as a starting point for the discussion. In the subsequent chapter, the central importance of God in the history of the inaugural tradition will be the subject of investigation. The following section will examine the religiously informed conception of American exceptionalism based on the notion of Americans as God's chosen people and the view of the United States as a divinely favored country. In addition, the discussion will also include myths derived from these venerable ideals, such as the conception of God as the originator of the American Union as well as of the United States' sacrosanct documents, its institutions, rituals, and shared values. The next part will then address the self-image of Americans as new Israelites and the idea deduced from it that God, like for the divine community of ancient Israel, has also intended a special destiny for them. The following two sections will deal with the role of the United States as God's agent in the world as well as the notion that their status as God's favorite nation requires that Americans live their lives in accordance with God's

laws and principles. The subsequent chapter then ties back in with the discussion of exceptionalism, as it deals with the nation's self-perception as a "city upon a hill" which nourishes the firm belief that the United States is unique and constitutes a prime example for other countries. In the ensuing section, the application of the theme of sacrifice in inaugural addresses will be the next subject of analysis, followed by a segment on biblical citations and prayers in inaugural speeches. After a brief conclusion outlining the insights gained so far, the focus of discussion will then shift to the shared values and principles which constitute the foundation of the American creed. Finally, a chapter summarizing the key findings of the case study and providing an outlook on future research in this field will close the discussion of religious myths and principles of the American creed in presidential inaugural addresses.

## 2. Definition of terms

### 2.1. Introduction

The focus of this chapter is directed towards providing the reader with a better understanding as well as definitions of important terms and concepts essential to the topic at hand, thereby laying the groundwork for the subsequent discussion. In the first of three sub-chapters, I intend to shed some light on the category of myth and present several interpretations and observations by academics and intellectuals who have made important contributions to its study before concluding the chapter with a definition of myth which best fits the purpose of this paper.

### 2.2. Myth

As Jean Pierre Vernant explains, our concept of myth traces back to the ancient Greeks, who perceived myth as a category of fictitious discourse.<sup>1</sup> Within Greek philosophy, myth (*muthos*) formed a contrast to the “reasoned discourse of *logos*” and was thus defined as a “discourse opposed both to truth [...] and [...] the rational.”<sup>2</sup> In what Joana Overing calls the “battle of Greek intellectuals to destroy the respectability of *muthos* in order to privilege the logic of *logos*,”<sup>3</sup> Bruce Lincoln identifies one of two momentous junctures in the history of the study of myth, namely, when “Plato stigmatized the category [of myth] [...] with the sign of the juvenile and irrational.”<sup>4</sup> Following Plato, only few held the concept of myth in high regard. As a consequence, “the mythic narratives of antiquity lost their authoritative status” during the subsequent centuries, and became “folktales, fairytales, local legends, and fables.”<sup>5</sup>

After a long period of decline and relative insignificance, the revitalization of myth began with the rediscovery of ancient texts during the Renaissance and, according to Lincoln, culminated in the late eighteenth century in another major turning point in

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<sup>1</sup> see Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, 203.

<sup>2</sup> Overing, *The Role of Myth*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Overing, *The Role of Myth*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 209.

<sup>5</sup> Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 47.

the historical interpretation of myth. This second seminal moment occurred when Johann Gottfried Herder, as one of the pioneers of romantic nationalism, which swept through Europe in the late seventeenth as well as early eighteenth centuries and fueled the revival of mythology, “recuperated [myth], marking it as primordial and authentic.”<sup>6</sup> Herder ascribed a special importance to myth, since, in his understanding, it plays a cardinal role in the process during which social groups and nations derive their respective collective identities. As a means of differentiation, myth serves as the source for the distinctive stories which nations develop “as they separate from one another” and “through which they recall [as well as] reproduce their distinctive features.”<sup>7</sup> Consequently, myths are a “treasured possession of each *Volk*, without which its identity and continuity would be quite impossible.”<sup>8</sup> The two contradictory interpretations of myth by Plato and Herder have produced a tension between myth as a “realm of the false” and myth “as a means of ‘real truth’ that exists beyond the limits of reason.”<sup>9</sup> As oppositions, which persist in tension with one another, they continue to influence the study of myth as well as our understanding of this abstract phenomenon.

Thus, Plato’s dismissive attitude toward myth prevailed through the Enlightenment and produced the master narrative of the entity that calls itself “Western Civilization.” This is the creation myth that makes all good things come from Greece and thematizes the transition “from *mythos* to *logos*” as the paradigm of the dynamism, progress, science, and rationality that are supposed to characterize and distinguish Europe forever after.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, the alleged triumph of *logos* over *mythos* or *muthos* is itself a myth. Despite the privileging of *logos* over *mythos* within the Occidental cultural sphere, the attempt to expunge myth from the domain of rational consciousness proved unsuccessful in the long run. Instead, the newly emerging nation-states of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries further revitalized old myths and even generated new ones. These myths were frequently related to historical events from long bygone times in order to construe the inception of the respective nation state as part of ancient history and to imply historical continuity.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, myth still enjoys “a powerful

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<sup>6</sup> Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 209.

<sup>7</sup> Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 210.

<sup>8</sup> Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 210.

<sup>9</sup> Kraftchick, *Recast, Reclaim, Reject*, 198.

<sup>10</sup> Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 209f.

<sup>11</sup> Flacke, *Mythen der Nationen*, 15.

presence in Western thinking,” and, as Martin Heusser and Gudrun Grabher point out, “has lost no ground in culture and politics.”<sup>12</sup> They further explain that the “causes for myth’s prevalence today form a complex pattern that is difficult to analyze because the role of myth is closely linked to the increasing complexity and the fundamentally antithetical needs and structures of Western societies.”<sup>13</sup> Since myth today is consequently an immensely diverse and complex phenomenon which fulfills a variety of functions, takes on different forms, and, as a term, encompasses so much, scholars struggle to find common ground concerning the questions what myth is, what it does, and how it should be interpreted. Perhaps no other field of research has produced such heterogeneity of opinions and definitions than the study of myth, as Ivan Strenski explains:

Myth is everything and nothing at the same time. It is *the* true story or a false one, revelation or deception, sacred or vulgar, real or fictional, symbol or tool, archetype or stereotype. It is either strongly structured and logical or emotional and pre-logical, traditional and primitive or part of contemporary ideology. Myth is about the gods, but often also the ancestors and sometimes certain men. [...] It is charter, recurring theme, character type, received idea, half-truth, tale or just a plain lie.<sup>14</sup>

For this reason, Geoffrey S. Kirk concludes that universalistic theories and definitions of myth need to be rejected, since no single definition can cover and incorporate all the different applications, forms and functions of myth. Instead, myth must be recognized “as a broad category, within which special forms and functions will require different kinds of explanation.”<sup>15</sup> However, as Philip Rahv points out, there is at least one point, which all scholars of myth, regardless of their approach, can agree upon:

[...] the one essential function of myth stressed by all writers is that in merging past and present it releases us from the flux of temporality, arresting change in the timeless, the permanent, the ever-recurrent conceived as “sacred repetition.” Hence the mythic is the polar opposite of what we mean by the historical, which stands for process, inexorable change, incessant permutation and innovation. Myth is reassuring in its stability,

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<sup>12</sup> Heusser & Grabher, *American Foundational Myths*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Heusser & Grabher, *American Foundational Myths*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Strenski, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth-Century History*, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Kirk, *On Defining Myths*, 60.

whereas history is that powerhouse of change which destroys custom and tradition in producing the future [...].<sup>16</sup>

So “while notions of fixity, conservatism and stagnation consequently appear to be intrinsically attributable to myth,” Stéphanie Durrans-Brochon notes that “the more vital function of myth as a producer of history seems to have been completely overlooked.”<sup>17</sup> Roland Barthes takes this notion even a step further, when he argues that the principle of myth is to “transform history into nature.”<sup>18</sup> For him, myth is a *metalanguage* because “it is a second language, in which one speaks about the first.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, Barthes understands myth as a “system of communication, [...] a form.”<sup>20</sup> As a consequence of this interpretation of myth, “everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse.”<sup>21</sup> Myth, in Barthes’ terms, is “depoliticized speech” because it “abolishes the complexity of human acts” and “does away with all dialectics,” thereby creating a world “of blissful clarity”<sup>22</sup> lacking contradictions. By providing what Barthes calls “a natural image of [...] reality,”<sup>23</sup> myth purifies and facilitates human relations within a society by masking the social struggles and tensions, which could destabilize existing social systems. Since myth deprives an idea or object from its historical reality, “defined [...] by the way in which men have produced or used it,” certain ideas “lose the memory that they once were made”<sup>24</sup> and are instead treated as something natural that must be accepted as it is rather than a product of society that can be challenged and contested. In this way, myth camouflages not only its own artificiality but also, as Heusser and Grabher explain, “the quality of the value systems and ideologies that underlie them.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, myth is an ideal and powerful ideological tool to “preserve and inculcate belief.”<sup>26</sup> Consequently, it is hardly surprising that in Barthes’ understanding, myth primarily serves socio-political purposes, since it is a vehicle that reinforces and thus upholds existing power structures through “the

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<sup>16</sup> *Rahv*, *The Myth and the Powerhouse*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> *Durrans-Brochon*, *The American Myth in Progress*, 117.

<sup>18</sup> *Barthes*, *Mythologies*, 129.

<sup>19</sup> *Barthes*, *Mythologies*, 115.

<sup>20</sup> *Barthes*, *Mythologies*, 109.

<sup>21</sup> *Barthes*, *Mythologies*, 109.

<sup>22</sup> *Barthes*, *Mythologies*, 143.

<sup>23</sup> *Barthes*, *Mythologies*, 142.

<sup>24</sup> *Barthes*, *Mythologies*, 142.

<sup>25</sup> *Heusser & Grabher*, *American Foundational Myths*, 12.

<sup>26</sup> *Heusser & Grabher*, *American Foundational Myths*, 12.

establishment and maintenance of authority and the formation and reinforcement of collective identity.”<sup>27</sup>

Apart from its potential to resolve and dissolve contradictions by naturalizing social and historical constructions into unchallengeable universal truths, myth, as a means of identification, fulfills another important role by constituting a referential system within which the members of a certain community operate, as George Schöpflin explains:

Myth is one of the ways in which collectivities – in this context, more especially nations – establish and determine the foundations of their own being, their own systems of morality and values. In this sense, therefore, myth is a set of beliefs, usually put forth as a narrative, held by a community about itself. Centrally, myth is about perceptions rather than historically validated truths (in so far as these exist at all), about the ways in which communities regard certain propositions as normal and natural and others as perverse and alien. Myth creates an intellectual and cognitive monopoly in that it seeks to establish the sole way of ordering the world and defining world-views. For the community to exist as a community, this monopoly is vital, and the individual members of that community must broadly accept the myth. [...] Members of a community may be aware that the myth they accept is not strictly accurate, but, because myth is not history, this does not matter. It is the content of the myth that is important, not its accuracy as a historical account.<sup>28</sup>

Due to their vital functions, myths “are taken with particular seriousness by [a] society,” as Northrop Frye has pointed out, “because they express something deep in that society’s beliefs or vision of its situation and destiny. Myths, unlike other types of stories, stick together to form a mythology.”<sup>29</sup> This latter point is echoed by Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty who has described myth as “a story that is part of a larger group of stories.”<sup>30</sup> The fact that myths are often inextricably linked with each other is also the reason why it can be difficult to make a clear-cut distinction between individual myths. The task of delineating them from one another can be even further complicated by the fact that, on top of that, they “may both overlap and be contradictory.”<sup>31</sup> According to

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<sup>27</sup> Heusser & Grabher, *American Foundational Myths*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Schöpflin, *The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths*, 19f.

<sup>29</sup> Frye, *The Educated Imagination*, 110.

<sup>30</sup> Doniger O’Flaherty, *Other People’s Myths*, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Schöpflin, *The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths*, 35.



the American historian and critic Richard Slotkin, these interrelated myths are “the language in which a society remembers its history.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, myth gives us a frame of reference that influences how we look at the past and determines what we focus on when we look at it. To quote Schöpflin again:

Enlightenment rationality presupposes that all actions can be understood by the cognitive instruments that its practitioners fashioned. The problem, however, was and is that personal idiosyncrasy is imported into this process by selection. No one can have total knowledge, hence selection is inevitable, but the criteria of selection are immediately open to question. Myth, and the analysis of myth, is one of the ways of looking at the criteria of selection, at the covert part of thinking and the biases, slants and prejudices that are [...] a necessary part of the way in which collectivities define their universe.<sup>33</sup>

However, it is important to state that myth not only constitutes an instrument for the interpretation of the past. By making sense of the past and explaining where we have come from, myth also gives meaning to the present and dictates how we interpret the future. To put it in Claude Lévi-Strauss’ words, “what gives the myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless; it explains the present and the past as well as the future.”<sup>34</sup>

Taking all this into account, I will employ the term myth in this thesis in a sense that is quite specific and tailored to my research topic as a constructed and interconnected set of beliefs, stories, and ideologies of a community or nation about itself. As such, myth serves as an instrument that both generates meaning and identity but also provides structure and coherence by explaining the past, the present, and the future as well as linking the three to one another. Since myth attributes distinct qualities to a community, it fosters a sense of belonging but also establishes boundaries which exclude those from groups who do not believe in the myth. Furthermore, due to its enduring viability, myth also reinforces the stability of a community and thereby provides security.

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<sup>32</sup> *Slotkin*, *Gunfighter Nation*, 655.

<sup>33</sup> *Schöpflin*, *The Functions of Myth and a Taxonomy of Myths*, 19.

<sup>34</sup> *Lévi-Strauss*, *Structural Anthropology*, 209.

### 2.3. The American creed

After having defined what is meant by myth, whenever this term appears in the text, it is also essential to clarify how I have chosen to employ the concept of American creed – a term which likewise requires some explanation and closer examination. As already noted in the introductory chapter, Gunnar Myrdal and Martin Seymour Lipset coined the term “American creed” to refer to a certain set of beliefs and values which is shared by all Americans. Myrdal examined this phenomenon and introduced the concept of the American creed in his influential work *An American Dilemma*, which was published in 1944. According to him, the so-called “dilemma” stems from the fact that “the political creed of America is not very satisfactorily effectuated in actual social life,”<sup>35</sup> which results in the continual contradiction between “a creed of equality and customs of inequality.”<sup>36</sup> However, despite the everyday practices of institutionalized discrimination and inequality, which Myrdal encountered in the United States, he paradoxically also reported a surprising amount of accord and harmony among Americans:

Still there is evidently a strong unity in this nation and a basic homogeneity and stability in its valuations. Americans of all national origins, classes, regions, creeds, and colors, have something in common: a social *ethos*, a political creed. It is difficult to avoid the judgment that this “American Creed” is the cement in the structure of this great and disparate nation.<sup>37</sup>

Robert N. Bellah also recognized and registered this unifying body of ideals, when he discussed the United States’ “public religious dimension [...] expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” which he termed the “American civil religion.”<sup>38</sup> Likewise, Sacvan Bercovitch described the American people as a “pluralistic, pragmatic people openly living in a dream, bound together by an ideological consensus unmatched by any other modern society.”<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, however, although such scholarly analyses of the “ideological consensus” succeeded in designating this phenomenon and defining it in concrete terms, they did not necessarily bring much to light that had not

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<sup>35</sup> *Myrdal*, *An American Dilemma*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> *Riley*, *The Presidency and the Politics of Racial Inequality*, x.

<sup>37</sup> *Myrdal*, *An American Dilemma*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> *Bellah*, *Civil Religion in America*, 4.

<sup>39</sup> *Bercovitch*, *The Rites of Assent*, 6.

already been known about the national character of the United States. The reason for this is that the description of American identity in ideational terms predates the scholarly descriptions of American nationalism.<sup>40</sup> Already before the outbreak of the American Revolution,<sup>41</sup> the French-American writer Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, for instance, propounded the now famous question, “What then is the American, this new man?” only to immediately answer it himself in one of his twelve *Letters from an American Farmer*.<sup>42</sup>

He is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, the new rank he holds. [...] The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles.<sup>43</sup>

In a similar way, Alexis de Tocqueville remarked after his travels to the United States in the 1830s that the American’s character is a distinctly new one since “his passions, his wants, his education, and everything about him seem to unite in drawing the native of the United States earthward.”<sup>44</sup> Due to this distinct and unique character, Tocqueville characterizes the position of the American people as exceptional and concludes that “it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one.”<sup>45</sup>

The reason for what Crevecoeur, Tocqueville and others had called an exceptional and unique American character, was later identified in the nation’s uncommon inception. Born out of revolution, the United States became the “first new nation”<sup>46</sup> and was founded on a set of shared values. As G. K. Chesterton has pointed out, “America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence; perhaps the only piece of practical politics that is also theoretical politics and also great literature.”<sup>47</sup> According to the historian Richard Hofstadter, an American nation without an American ideology is thus inconceivable, since the fact that the

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<sup>40</sup> see *Beasley*, *You, the People*, 28.

<sup>41</sup> see *Hamilton & Jones*, *Encyclopedia of the Environment in American Literature*, 77.

<sup>42</sup> Due to the political turmoil of the Revolutionary era, multiple years passed until the series of letters was finally published in 1782.

<sup>43</sup> *Crevecoeur*, *Letters from an American Farmer*, 54-56.

<sup>44</sup> *Tocqueville*, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, 37.

<sup>45</sup> *Tocqueville*, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, 36.

<sup>46</sup> *Lipset*, *The First New Nation*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> *Chesterton*, *What I Saw in America*, 7.

former is intrinsic to the latter establishes an inseparable link between the two. Or as Hofstadter himself put it, “It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies, but to be one.”<sup>48</sup> And indeed, over the last two centuries, many intellectuals have observed that Americans are “more ideological and more ideologically united than their counterparts elsewhere.”<sup>49</sup> This sentiment has even been shared by critics: Matthew Arnold, who “was far less admiring of the United States than many of his contemporaries,”<sup>50</sup> acknowledged the existence of a national unity based on shared beliefs and values, even though he criticized that these ideals had made Americans blind to their own shortcomings. Concerning this alleged deficiency of the American people, Arnold noted:

But now the Americans seem, in certain manners, to have agreed, as a people, to deceive themselves, to persuade themselves that they have what they have not, to cover the defects in their civilization by boasting, to fancy that they well and truly solve, not only the political and social problem, but the human problem too. One would say that they do really hope to find in [...] inflated sentiment a substitute for the real sense of elevation which human nature [...] instinctively craves.<sup>51</sup>

To sum up, many scholars have agreed that Americans are an exceptional people, since they are cemented together by a national creed and thus share particular ways of thinking. However, it is important to clarify here that when intellectuals have referred to the United States or its citizens as “exceptional” or “unique,” they have not intended to suggest that America or Americans are superior to other countries or peoples. Rather, they have simply expressed the conviction that the United States “is qualitatively different, that it is an outlier.”<sup>52</sup> Such as when Myrdal assesses that “America, compared to every other country in Western civilization, large or small, has the most explicitly expressed system of general ideals in reference to human interrelations. This body of ideals is more widely understood and appreciated than similar ideals are anywhere else.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> quoted in *Kazin*, *The Right’s Unsung Prophets*, 242.

<sup>49</sup> *Beasley*, *The Rhetoric of Ideological Consensus in the United States*, 170.

<sup>50</sup> *Beasley*, *The Rhetoric of Ideological Consensus in the United States*, 171.

<sup>51</sup> *Arnold*, *Civilization in the United States*, 182f.

<sup>52</sup> *Lipset*, *American Exceptionalism*, 18.

<sup>53</sup> *Myrdal*, *An American Dilemma*, 3.

Apart from highlighting the pronounced distinctiveness of the American “ideological consensus,” to borrow Bercovitch’s term again, Myrdal’s quote contains another important insight. By referring to the beliefs and values incorporated in the American creed as “general ideals,” Myrdal expresses his conviction that the American creed does not consist of distinctly American ideals but universal ones. According to Lipset, the concept of the American creed can be divided into five components (liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire)<sup>54</sup> all of which are rooted in John Locke's liberal philosophy, “which strongly distrusts the state and emphasizes competitive meritocracy.”<sup>55</sup> In saying this, Lipset not only reiterates Louis Hartz’ notion that Lockean liberalism is the underlying root of U.S. ideology,<sup>56</sup> but he also supports Myrdal’s conclusion that American ideals are, in fact, “humane ideals,”<sup>57</sup> which, just as contemporary European values, have developed out of the epoch of Enlightenment and, thus, do not only apply within the borders of the United States. In other words, the American creed “is no American monopoly” and is only called “‘American’ in the sense that it is adhered to by the Americans.”<sup>58</sup>

What makes the American creed nevertheless unique is the fact that “a vast democracy with so many cultural disparities” like the United States was able to accomplish such unprecedented “unanimity of ideals and to elevate them supremely over the threshold of popular perception.”<sup>59</sup> One reason for this is that “[t]he sources of the Creed,” such as the “Enlightenment ideas that became popular among some American elites in the mid-eighteenth century [...] found receptive ground in the Anglo-Protestant culture that had already existed in America for over a century.”<sup>60</sup> As Samuel P. Huntington has pointed out, “[t]he Protestant emphasis on the individual conscience and the responsibility of the individual to learn God’s truth directly from the Bible promoted American commitment to individualism, equality, and the rights to freedom of religion and opinion.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, the American creed “is a distinct

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<sup>54</sup> see *Lipset*, *American Exceptionalism*, 19.

<sup>55</sup> *Lipset*, *American Exceptionalism*, 144.

<sup>56</sup> see *Hartz*, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, 9.

<sup>57</sup> *Myrdal*, *An American Dilemma*, 25.

<sup>58</sup> *Myrdal*, *An American Dilemma*, 25.

<sup>59</sup> *Myrdal*, *An American Dilemma*, 6.

<sup>60</sup> *Huntington*, *Who Are We?*, 68.

<sup>61</sup> *Huntington*, *Who Are We?*, 68.

fusion of its pre-political religious roots and its political, constitutional form”<sup>62</sup> into, what Abraham Lincoln already called in 1838, “the political religion of the nation.”<sup>63</sup> As a result, religion, according to Horst Mewes, plays a vital role in the United States beyond its “historical influence” upon the American creed and its “basic American political values,”<sup>64</sup> since it still serves as a “source and support for public morality” as well as a basis for the nation’s sense of “cultural and social unity and harmony.”<sup>65</sup>

Another reason for Americans’ unparalleled commitment and adherence to their value system lies in the uncommon nature of American selfhood, since the United States, unlike most other countries in the world, does not derive its national identity from a common genealogy, culture, or ethnicity. Instead, as a country of immigrants whose citizens lack hereditary and historical ties, its nationality is rooted in ideology. Thus, in principle, everyone can assimilate in this country,<sup>66</sup> as long as they are willing to dedicate themselves to the beliefs and values that constitute the American creed, as Philip Gleason explains:

The ideological quality of American national identity was of decisive importance, vis-à-vis the question of immigration and ethnicity. To become an American a person did not have to be of any particular national, linguistic, religious, or ethnic background. All he had to do was to commit himself to the political ideology centered on the abstract ideals of liberty, equality and republicanism. Thus the universalist ideological character of American nationality meant that it was open to anyone who willed to become an American.<sup>67</sup>

However, the fact that becoming an American is an “ideological act”<sup>68</sup> also has its disadvantages. Since the national identities of most European countries, for instance, are based on history, heredity, and ethnicity, “one cannot become un-English or un-Swedish. Being an American, however,” as Lipset explains, “is an ideological commitment. It is not a matter of birth.”<sup>69</sup> Consequently, whoever rejects American

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<sup>62</sup> Mewes, *Religion and Politics in American Democracy*, 19.

<sup>63</sup> Lincoln, *Address Before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, IL*, January 27, 1838.

<sup>64</sup> Mewes, *Religion and Politics in American Democracy*, 13.

<sup>65</sup> Mewes, *Religion and Politics in American Democracy*, 19.

<sup>66</sup> The same holds true, for instance, for France, where integration is also understood as being based on shared values and ideals rather than descent, history, or ethnic composition.

<sup>67</sup> Gleason, *American Identity and Americanization*, 32.

<sup>68</sup> Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, 18.

<sup>69</sup> Lipset, *American Exceptionalism*, 31.

ideals, acts and risks to be considered un-American. In addition to this, an “ideological consensus” harbors the danger that inequality and differences within society may be covered up and that inequity is thus reinforced, resulting in what Myrdal seventy years ago dubbed the “American Dilemma.”<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, especially critics of the United States also consider it problematic that Americans give their nation and its creed “many of the attributes and functions of a church,”<sup>71</sup> and thereby “provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere.”<sup>72</sup> These moral standards have, on the one hand, played a vital role in the development of American political institutions, but, on the other hand, can also evoke moral absolutism and a Manichean dichotomy between “good” and “evil” or “us” and “them.”<sup>73</sup> This holds especially true for the domain of foreign affairs, as the United States has been inclined to consider foreign conflicts as battles of good versus evil while American political leaders have recurrently employed moralistic language to refer to what the country perceives as its enemies.<sup>74</sup> For all these reasons, it comes as no surprise then that Lipset has labeled the American creed as “something of a double-edged sword.”<sup>75</sup>

Although the American creed does not only have positive implications, and despite the fact that its components are remnants of long gone centuries while the United States itself has undergone significant changes over the last 230 years, it is worth noting that the American creed “is still a dynamic part of the culture.”<sup>76</sup> As a consequence, it remains an influential and vital element in American thought which continues to influence how Americans see the world and interact with each other. This is underpinned by the fact that the tenets of the American creed as “the ideological foundation of national morale”<sup>77</sup> found their way into the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble of the Constitution, the Bill of Rights as well as several state constitutions. As a result, the ideals of the American creed have become both sacred and sanctified

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<sup>70</sup> *Myrdal, An American Dilemma.*

<sup>71</sup> *Huntington, American Politics, 159.*

<sup>72</sup> *Bellah, Civil Religion in America, 3f.*

<sup>73</sup> see *Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 63-67.*

<sup>74</sup> Two prominent examples that have made use of this Manichaeism of good and evil are the two former U.S. presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. During the Cold War era, Reagan described the Soviet Union as the “evil empire” in his address to the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida in 1983. Bush, on the other hand, referred to the countries of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as the “axis of evil” in his 2002 State of the Union address.

<sup>75</sup> *Lipset, American Exceptionalism, 268.*

<sup>76</sup> *Lipset, The First New Nation, 318.*

<sup>77</sup> *Myrdal, An American Dilemma, 5.*

“as the highest law of the land.”<sup>78</sup> In addition to this, the aspiration to gain insight into this creed that unites Americans as citizens has prompted legions of scholars to study the shared ideals of Americans and has consequently led to a heightened awareness among the people regarding their own national identity. This practice of self-reflection and self-analysis, as Arthur Mann explains, has engaged the American people in “a two-centuries-long dialogue with themselves about the meaning and the implementation of their distinguishing idea.”<sup>79</sup> So, to quote John Dewey, “[c]all it a dream or call it vision, it has been interwoven in a tradition that has had an immense effect upon American life.”<sup>80</sup>

## 2.4. The presidential inauguration

The final section of the second chapter will focus on the presidential inauguration and the political spectacle surrounding the arrival of a new president in the nation’s capital. Providing the reader with essential background information on the solemn ritual of the presidential inauguration is important, since the genre of the inaugural address is embedded in the context of and thus essentially influenced by this ceremonial celebration, which commences the beginning of a new presidential term.

2014 marked the 225<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the historically memorable event when George Washington took his oath of office on the balcony of the Senate Chamber at Federal Hall on New York City’s Wall Street on April 30, 1789 to become the first president of the world’s first modern republic. Less than a year earlier, today’s oldest constitution in continuous use had been put into operation in order to provide the framework and principles for what became an exemplary political system for many countries in the world. The inauguration ceremony is a central ritual in this renowned political system and “represents an important junction”<sup>81</sup> in the rhythms of American politics. When President Ronald Reagan praised the uniqueness and role model function

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<sup>78</sup> *Myrdal*, *An American Dilemma*, 4.

<sup>79</sup> *Mann*, *The One and the Many*, 47.

<sup>80</sup> *Dewey*, *Freedom and Culture*, 55.

<sup>81</sup> *King*, *Newspapers*, 113.



of the American democracy in his inaugural address in 1981, he, in the same breath, emphasized the exceptional status of the presidential inauguration:

To a few of us here today, this is a solemn and most momentous occasion; and yet, in the history of our Nation, it is a commonplace occurrence. The orderly transfer of authority as called for in the Constitution routinely takes place as it has for almost two centuries and few of us stop to think how unique we really are. In the eyes of many in the world, this every-4-year ceremony we accept as normal is nothing less than a miracle.<sup>82</sup>

In other words, according to Reagan, the presidential inauguration, as a vital part of the political system, accomplishing the orderly and peaceful transfer of power of the most important position within the U.S. government, is itself outstanding and truly remarkable.<sup>83</sup> In 1857, in the aftermath of the inauguration of President Buchanan, the editor of the *Nashville Union and American* had taken a similar line when he dubbed the ceremony a “happy illustration of the genius and spirit of republican institutions.”<sup>84</sup>

The significance attributed to the presidential inauguration in the United States is especially noticeable in regard to the public attention that this political event attracts. While the inaugurations of democratic heads of states and governments in other countries are barely taken note of by the respective general public, the start of a new presidential term is an event of national note in America. Barack Obama’s first inauguration, for instance, drew more than a million spectators and set a record attendance for any event held in the nation’s capital. As Ted Widmer points out, only few states, with the possible exception of certain European monarchies and the Vatican, “place such a high premium on the rituals attending the transfer of power. These elaborate and pompous ceremonies tease out a tension that is as present in the twenty-first century as it was in the eighteenth, when the United States was still an iffy proposition.”<sup>85</sup> This kind of “tension” and public interest is usually only aroused by

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<sup>82</sup> *Reagan*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981.

<sup>83</sup> From today’s point of view, Reagan’s description of the orderly transfer of power as a miracle may seem exaggerated and self-aggrandizing. However, if one calls to mind, for instance, what Jefferson later termed the “Revolution of 1800,” which marked the first and precedent-setting peaceful transfer of power between two U.S. political parties after a fiercely contested election in an age when the rest of the Western world was still governed by monarchs, one has to acknowledge the appropriateness of Reagan’s words.

<sup>84</sup> quoted in *Stampp*, *America in 1857*, 66.

<sup>85</sup> *Widmer*, *So Help Me God*, 30.

great monarchical events, such as coronations, royal weddings, and funerals. And, in fact, if one takes a closer look at the numerous rituals that accompany a presidential inauguration, one cannot evade the impression that Americans must have drawn heavily on European monarchical role models and their “medieval antecedents”<sup>86</sup> in framing and conceptualizing the event. For this reason, and since the event today also reflects the powerful position that the United States occupies in the world, it is not surprising that some observers of the inauguration festivities have noted that they perceived the ceremony as “more [of a] coronation than inauguration”<sup>87</sup> due to its monarchical overtones.

However, despite the obvious parallels between U.S. presidential inaugurations and the pomp of European coronations, Americans have always been eager to pointedly distance themselves from any form of monarchical tradition. After all, the United States epitomizes the ultimate break with monarchical institutions and landed aristocracy after they successfully fought in the Revolutionary War for their independence and against the perceived tyranny of the British crown. Furthermore, especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, monarchical principles were repugnant to a nation whose people believe in individual liberty and whose history has taught them to distrust any form of concentration of centralized power. Thus, it comes as no surprise that, after George Washington had been elected the first president of the United States in 1789, the members of the Senate were embroiled in a prolonged debate over the issue of how to address the president on Inauguration Day and beyond. As Jack D. Warren points out, the issue could not be resolved until long after Washington’s inauguration, not until May 14, in fact.<sup>88</sup> Finally, in order to avoid alienating the American people, who, according to Senator William Maclay of Pennsylvania, now abhorred “all the trappings and Splendor of Royalty,”<sup>89</sup> the Senate decided to follow the House of Representatives’ example and simply address Washington as “President of the United States,” since “His Most Benign Highness,” and “His Highness, the President of the United States of America, and Protector of their Liberties” had been considered royal ostentation.

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<sup>86</sup> *Widmer*, *So Help Me God*, 30.

<sup>87</sup> *Heymann*, *American Legacy*, 78.

<sup>88</sup> see *Warren*, *John Adams*, 7.

<sup>89</sup> quoted in *Warren*, *John Adams*, 7.

One year after Washington's first inauguration, the decision was made to move the federal capital from New York to the city of Philadelphia. Hence, President Washington to this day remains the only president who resided in New York and was inaugurated in two different cities.<sup>90</sup> However, also Philadelphia's status as capital city proved only temporary, since in the same year Congress decided to build a new federal capital along the Potomac River in the newly created District of Columbia. Thomas Jefferson was the first president who was sworn in at the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C on March 4, 1801. In 1817, James Monroe moved the ceremony to a platform in front of the Old Brick Capitol and thus became the first president who was inaugurated outdoors. Twelve years later, Andrew Jackson embarked on a new tradition by taking the oath of office and delivering his inaugural address out-of-doors at the eastern front of the Capitol.<sup>91</sup> Since most of the subsequent presidents followed suit, the ceremony to signify the presidential transfer of power was from then on traditionally held on the east front portico of the U.S. Capitol, until Ronald Reagan broke from the precedent of his predecessors in 1981 to establish a new tradition. Wishing to face his home state California, America's fortieth president moved the inauguration to the west portico of the Capitol.<sup>92</sup> Since then, all his successors have been inaugurated on the building's west front, "allowing a majestic view of the Potomac River, Pennsylvania Avenue, the Mall, the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial."<sup>93</sup>

Apart from several shifts of location, the date of the presidential inauguration was also subject to change. While George Washington's first inauguration took place with a delay of almost two months on April 30, since bad weather had prevented many congressmen from arriving on time and thus the quorum needed to tally the electoral votes could not be established until the beginning of April,<sup>94</sup> subsequent inaugural ceremonies were held on March 4, as provided for by the Constitution. This regulation remained in force until 1933, when the Twentieth Amendment was added to the Constitution and established January 20 as the beginning of a president's term, in order to shorten the amount of time between Election Day and the inauguration of the

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<sup>90</sup> see The Library of Congress, *Presidential Oaths of Office*.

<sup>91</sup> see The Library of Congress, *Inaugurals of Presidents of the United States*.

<sup>92</sup> see *Schlesinger & Israel, My Fellow Citizens*, vii.

<sup>93</sup> *Bendat, Democracy's Big Day*, 53.

<sup>94</sup> see The Center for Legislative Archives, *George Washington's Inaugural Address*.

president-elect.<sup>95</sup> Since 1937, the public inaugural ceremonies have not been held on January 20 only, if the constitutionally mandated date for the presidential inauguration has fallen on a Sunday, which was the case in 1957, 1985 and 2013. Whenever Inauguration Day falls on a Sunday, the incoming president is typically sworn into office privately on January 20, and then repeats the oath publicly the next day.<sup>96</sup>

In addition, not all forty-four presidents of the United States have had the pleasure to experience a public inauguration ceremony to celebrate the beginning of their presidential tenure. As Terri Bimes and Mary E. Stuckey explain, ascendant vice presidents who succeeded to office unexpectedly upon the death or resignation of their predecessor “have not given full-fledged inaugural addresses”<sup>97</sup> and also did “not have the accompanying ritual and occasion.”<sup>98</sup> Instead, the nine presidents who assumed the presidency mid-term generally took the oath of office privately, but subsequently gave public speeches that fulfilled a function similar to inaugural addresses, as exemplified by Lyndon B. Johnson's 1963 address to a joint session of Congress five days after JFK's assassination, or Gerald Ford's televised remarks upon his swearing in on August 9, 1974 following the resignation of President Nixon.

With reference to the oath of office, it is important to mention that this is the only component of an inauguration that is mandated by the Constitution. Before a president-elect can assume office, he is required to take the following oath: “I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my Ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.”<sup>99</sup> According to Washington Irving's *George Washington: A Biography*, published in five volumes between 1856 and 1859, the nation's first president concluded the oath of office with the words “so help me God.”<sup>100</sup> Although there is no historical evidence to support Irving's claim, this story nevertheless set a historical precedent that various subsequent presidents have followed.<sup>101</sup> In fact, since Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933, every president has capped his

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<sup>95</sup> see *Milkis & Nelson*, *The American Presidency*, 289.

<sup>96</sup> see *Sullivan*, *Constitution*, 65.

<sup>97</sup> *Bimes*, *Inaugurations*, 262.

<sup>98</sup> *Stuckey*, *Inaugural Addresses*, 261.

<sup>99</sup> U.S. Constitution, Article II, Section 1.

<sup>100</sup> see *Irving*, *George Washington*, 652.

<sup>101</sup> see *Church*, *So Help Me God*, 445-449.

oath with these famous four words.<sup>102</sup> Another traditional practice at inaugurations, which is not prescribed by the Constitution, but is also attributed to a precedent set by Washington,<sup>103</sup> is that the incoming president takes the oath of office on a Bible. Moreover, it has been custom since the inauguration of John Adams “for the oath to be administered by the chief justice of the United States at all regular inaugurations.”<sup>104</sup>

In addition to the several rituals hitherto mentioned, everything else that happens on Inauguration Day (with the exception of the oath of office) can also be ascribed to custom and tradition, accumulated over the more than two centuries since George Washington became the first president. Other customs surrounding the inauguration include the inaugural parade, the inaugural balls, the presidential procession to the White House, the prayer service, and, of course, the inaugural address. Traditionally, it has also been practice “for the president-elect to come to the White House and make the trip to the Capitol with the incumbent president, signaling a peaceful transition.”<sup>105</sup> Only three outgoing presidents in the persons of John Adams, John Quincy Adams, and Andrew Johnson have refused to bestow such an honor upon their successors, although the latter only declined to attend the inauguration in 1869 after he had learnt that “President-elect Grant would not ride in the same carriage with him.”<sup>106</sup>

Despite the fact that the inaugural address itself is not prescribed in the Constitution, it has been a characteristic feature of inaugural ceremonies ever since George Washington initiated this tradition in 1789. As Bimes points out, over the course of time, inaugural addresses have even become the “most visible and important part”<sup>107</sup> of the solemnities of inauguration. Interestingly enough, however, it is still uncertain “why, in fact, Washington felt compelled to speak at all on the day he launched the American presidency in 1789.”<sup>108</sup> Apart from the fact that the delivery of an inaugural address is not constitutionally mandated, also coronations of European monarchs did not feature original speeches given by the respective monarchs themselves. However, regardless of his motives, when Washington seized the occasion

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<sup>102</sup> see *Bendat*, *Democracy's Big Day*, 28.

<sup>103</sup> It also needs to be stated here that this notion likewise lacks historical evidence.

<sup>104</sup> *Patrick et al.*, *The Oxford Guide to the United States Government*, 455.

<sup>105</sup> *Bimes*, *Inaugurations*, 262.

<sup>106</sup> *The Editors of American Heritage Magazine*, *The Inaugural Story 1789–1969*, 42.

<sup>107</sup> *Bimes*, *Inaugurations*, 262.

<sup>108</sup> *Widmer*, *So Help Me God*, 31.

of his inauguration to give a speech, he established an unprecedented, “uniquely republican ritual,”<sup>109</sup> and a new form of political oration, which soon took over an important role in the young republic, as Daniel J. Boorstin explains:

In a new nation lacking inherited ritual, an original oration filled the vacuum. The inaugural address, like the sermon in a New England puritan service, held the center of attention. By 1832, in fact, the adjective “inaugural” had come to be used as a noun to mean the President’s inaugural address. And similar ceremonies became routine for governors of states, heads of colleges, and others.<sup>110</sup>

As a consequence, inaugural addresses today gain exceptional attention from both the press and public, and “are commonly reprinted in newspapers and, more recently, broadcast on television, radio, and Internet sources.”<sup>111</sup> However, for the American people, they represent more than just a unique national ritual. As Dante Germino explains, Americans, regardless of their party affiliation, have developed the tendency “to look to the President for hope and for a rearticulation of the nations ‘public philosophy’”<sup>112</sup> at crucial times, such as the day that marks the transfer of power from one administration to another. This again has influenced both the content and rhetoric of inaugural addresses, and contributes to their epideictic and ritualistic nature. As a result, presidential inaugurals promote allegedly shared national values, articulate the principles that will govern a president’s term in office, and rehearse the past which, in further consequence, is also linked to the present moment as well as to the country’s future. Moreover, these typical epideictic features are, to quote Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “modified by the nature of presidential investiture”<sup>113</sup> and together generate “a constellation of five interrelated elements”<sup>114</sup> which distinguishes the genre of inaugural addresses from similar types of rhetoric, thereby ensuring its uniqueness:

The presidential inaugural 1) unifies the audience by reconstituting its members as "the people" who can witness and ratify this ceremony; 2) rehearses communal values drawn from the past; 3) sets forth the political principles that will govern the new

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<sup>109</sup> *Bowman*, *Inaugural Addresses of U.S. Presidents*, 419.

<sup>110</sup> *Boorstin*, *The Americans*, 313.

<sup>111</sup> *Beasley*, *You, the People*, 11f.

<sup>112</sup> *Germino*, *The Inaugural Addresses of American Presidents*, 2.

<sup>113</sup> *Campbell & Jamieson*, *Inaugurating the Presidency*, 395.

<sup>114</sup> *Campbell & Jamieson*, *Inaugurating the Presidency*, 395.

administration; 4) demonstrates that the President appreciates the requirements and limitations of his executive functions; and 5) achieves these ends through means appropriate to epideictic address, i.e., while urging contemplation not action, focusing on the present while incorporating past and future, and praising the institution of the Presidency and the values and form of the government of which it is a part.<sup>115</sup>

In other words, the rhetorical genre's embeddedness in its institutional context as a vital part of the inauguration ceremony refines its epideictic rhetoric, adds a constitutive dimension, and thus shapes the very nature of presidential inaugurals. In addition, the ritualistic essence of inaugural addresses is further reinforced by the fact that "presidents are familiar with the tradition and tend to study past inaugurals before formulating their own."<sup>116</sup>

However, inaugural addresses are more than just a ceremonial and ritualistic form of discourse which conform to "generic prescriptions"<sup>117</sup> and fulfill a symbolic function. In order to demonstrate this fact, Campbell and Jamieson point to inaugurals "in which presidents have reconstituted the people in new terms and have selectively reaffirmed and reinvigorated those communal values consistent with the philosophy and tone of the incoming administration" and which thereby unveil ways "in which a ritualistic occasion may be directed toward other ends," for instance, to ideologically "lay the groundwork for policy initiatives."<sup>118</sup> The authors further explain that "when we say that presidents constitute the people, we mean that all presidents have the opportunity to persuade us to conceive of ourselves in ways compatible with their views of government and the world. At the same time, presidents invite us to see them, the presidency, the country, and the country's role in specific ways."<sup>119</sup> In this sense, Campbell and Jamieson hold a similar view to Dennis Florig who argues that presidents have the ability to shape the way their compatriots perceive the world.<sup>120</sup> Since different presidents follow different intentions, but also due to the variations brought about by different circumstances, historical eras, and leadership personalities, Campbell and

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<sup>115</sup> *Campbell & Jamieson*, *Inaugurating the Presidency*, 396.

<sup>116</sup> *Campbell & Jamieson*, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 53.

<sup>117</sup> *Ryan*, *The Inaugural Addresses of Twentieth-Century American Presidents*, xvi.

<sup>118</sup> *Campbell & Jamieson*, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 48.

<sup>119</sup> *Campbell & Jamieson*, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 8.

<sup>120</sup> see *Florig*, *The Power of Presidential Ideologies*, 7.

Jamieson conclude that inaugural addresses “vary substantively” and that this “illuminates the U.S. presidential inaugural as a genre.”<sup>121</sup>

While it is true that inaugural addresses also contain paragraphs which may be considered by some to be less ritualistic and epideictic, since they propose and discuss specific policies, these segments of inaugurals still distinguish themselves from other types of presidential speeches with similar contents, such as the State of the Union addresses. Although concrete policy proposals are embedded in both genres, though they appear to a lesser extent in inaugurals, they serve completely different purposes in these two types of presidential oratory, due to the epideictic character of inaugural addresses. State of the Union messages assess and recommend concrete measures in order to instigate Congressional action. In inaugural addresses, to the contrary, specific policies are not discussed because the respective president necessarily seeks to stir action in the U.S. Congress. Instead, these policy proposals rather serve as “illustrations of the political philosophy of the speaker” and fulfill a “contemplative, expository function.”<sup>122</sup> In addition to this, State of the Union speeches, unlike presidential inaugurals, are not embedded into a specific environment, since no president between Jefferson<sup>123</sup> and Wilson delivered his State of the Union address in person, but, instead, sent written messages to Congress. This practice, which was also taken up by several presidents in the twentieth century, was sufficient, because of the fact that the Constitution merely required the president to “from time to time give to Congress information of the State of the Union and recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.”<sup>124</sup> Due to this provision, State of the Union messages, especially before the advent of radio and television, were also primarily directed to the audience of Congressmen and women, whereas inaugural addresses have been usually delivered in front of an open public assembly.

Apart from all the characteristics of presidential inaugurals discussed so far, they share another important quality, since these speeches do not only have meaning for the time in which they were uttered, but retain their rhetorical force beyond Inauguration

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<sup>121</sup> *Campbell & Jamieson, Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 53.

<sup>122</sup> *Campbell & Jamieson, Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 40.

<sup>123</sup> In 1801, Jefferson became the first U.S. president who did not deliver the address in person because he considered this practice as too monarchical and reminiscent of a speech from the throne.

<sup>124</sup> U.S. Constitution, Article II, Section 3.



Day. In other words, the contents of presidential inaugurals transcend the ceremonial rituals of transition in which they are embedded and thus many of them have lost none of their topicality, despite the fact that they were delivered decades and centuries ago.

For instance, although Lincoln's first inaugural addressed a nation poised on the brink of civil war, Lincoln's message speaks to all situations in which the rights of constituent units are seen to clash with the powers of a central body. Similarly, the eloquent conclusion of Lincoln's second inaugural remains applicable to the wounds the nation suffered in the conflict over the war in Vietnam. [...] Inaugurals bespeak their locus in the eternal present in a high style that heightens experience, invites contemplation, and speaks to the people through time. The language of great inaugurals captures complex, resonant ideas in memorable phrases.<sup>125</sup>

Thus, several memorable quotes from presidential inaugurals have found their way into the collective memory of Americans. They still recall Jefferson's "We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists" and "peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none."<sup>126</sup> They continue to quote Kennedy's "And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country,"<sup>127</sup> while not to forget the presumably most powerful lines of all inaugural addresses, uttered by Lincoln in 1865:

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 lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.<sup>128</sup>

Furthermore, several inaugural addresses, such as Jefferson's first, both by Lincoln, Roosevelt's first, and Kennedy's, are today considered among the greatest and most significant political speeches in American history.<sup>129</sup> Regardless of their individual status, all presidential inaugurals taken together in sequence not only form a tradition but also comprise what Ted Widmer calls "an essential course in American history, a

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<sup>125</sup> *Campbell & Jamieson*, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 47.

<sup>126</sup> *Jefferson*, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801.

<sup>127</sup> *Kennedy*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.

<sup>128</sup> *Lincoln*, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865.

<sup>129</sup> see *Widmer*, *So Help Me God*, 32.

Book of the Republic, roughly 500 pages long, depending on your font size.”<sup>130</sup> This voluminous book has provided the research basis for the following chapters, which constitute the main body of this thesis and will provide an examination of the application of various religiously inspired mythic ideals and principles of the American creed in the inaugural addresses of United States presidents.

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<sup>130</sup> *Widmer, So Help Me God*, 32.

### **3. Religious myths in the inaugural addresses of American presidents**

#### **3.1. Introduction – the religious dimension of the American creed**

In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in his influential two-volume work *Democracy in America* that “there is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America.”<sup>1</sup> However, the “puzzling strength of organized religion”<sup>2</sup> in the United States did not only astound nineteenth-century scholars. Also observers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries noted a deep-seated religious conviction held by the vast majority of Americans. Consequently, the notion still prevails that, concerning the abiding piety and religiosity of its people, America constitutes the great exception among Western industrialized nations. For instance, Anne-Marie Slaughter in *The Idea that is America* declares that, also today, “Americans are more religious than anyone else in the developed world,”<sup>3</sup> while Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman in their book *One Nation under God* conclude that in the United States “organized religion is no weaker [...] now than in the past.”<sup>4</sup>

The validity of such remarks, which reflect how religion still permeates the lives of many people in the United States, is supported by quantitative data. According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2002, fifty-nine percent of Americans consider religion a very important factor in their lives, which is approximately twice the percentage of Canadians who subscribe to that view. Compared to European nations such as Italy (27 percent), Germany (21 percent), or France (11 percent), the greater religiosity of Americans becomes even more apparent.<sup>5</sup> Unlike all these nations, America also contradicts the widespread assumption that “economic development goes hand in hand with a decline in religious sentiment.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the status of the United States as an exception to this generalization and as an anomaly in the developed world

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<sup>1</sup> *Tocqueville*, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 1, 314.

<sup>2</sup> *Lipset*, *American Exceptionalism*, 61.

<sup>3</sup> *Slaughter*, *The Idea that is America*, 200.

<sup>4</sup> *Kosmin & Lachman*, *One Nation under God*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> see The Pew Research Center, *The Pew Global Attitudes Project*.

<sup>6</sup> *Wald*, *Religion and Politics in the United States*, 6.

is further reinforced by the fact that, in any given week, more Americans go to church than to all sports events combined.<sup>7</sup>

The religiosity of Americans has also left its imprint on the country's political sphere. Since the days of George Washington, numerous presidents as well as other high-ranking U.S. political officials have asserted their conviction that the American people constitute a unique and exceptional union under the providence of God and have thus repeatedly referred to their fellow compatriots as "God's chosen people." Likewise, this notion is also reflected in the official national motto of the United States "In God We Trust"<sup>8</sup> and in the description of the country as "one nation under God." In addition to this, the prayer that is spoken before the opening of each session of both the United States Senate and House of Representatives illustrates another example from the long list of products of this peculiar entanglement between the political and religious sphere.

In view of these distinctive features of American politics, Robert N. Bellah once famously asked whether it is conceivable that the world would ever see an openly agnostic American president. In other words, could "a man with conscientious scruples about using the word 'God' [...] be elected chief magistrate of [the United States]?"<sup>9</sup> In the long run, "the further pluralization of American society [may] permit a positive answer to that question,"<sup>10</sup> as Conrad Cherry has pointed out. However, the immediate response on that matter has to be a negative one, even more so if we take Robert D. Putnam's and David E. Campbell's analysis of the contemporary political scene into account. According to them, there are no indications that would suggest that a process of secularization was imminent in American politics. On the contrary, the last fifty years have seen a trend towards "an even more pronounced cultural presence for American evangelicals [...] in the political arena" and a rise in "religiously infected issues [...] on the national political agenda"<sup>11</sup> due to the conservative backlash following the tumultuous times and rapid social changes of the 1960s.

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<sup>7</sup> see *Wills*, *Under God*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> The bill declaring "In God We Trust" the official motto of the USA was signed into law on July 30, 1956.

<sup>9</sup> *Bellah*, *Civil Religion in America*, 15.

<sup>10</sup> *Cherry*, *God's New Israel*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Putnam & Campbell*, *American Grace*, 3.

As a consequence of all this, the non-American observer is confronted with a paradox. On the one hand, America's political domain is permeated with religious themes, references and symbolism, while, on the other hand, the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights guarantees the constitutional separation between church and state. Since its ratification in 1791, it has explicitly prohibited Congress from enacting any legislation "respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."<sup>12</sup> These words safeguard the right to religious freedom for all Americans, which subsequently became one of the major pull factors for immigrants to the United States. So how is it possible then that the mention of God is an integral feature of presidential speeches, particularly on solemn occasions like presidential inaugurations, despite the existence of a law which undoubtedly separates the political realm of the state from the religious realm of the church? Should "the wall of separation,"<sup>13</sup> as Jefferson referred to the First Amendment in a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, written in 1802, not also ensure that the country's political affairs are free of religious premises, allusions, and arguments? To quote Bellah again:

The answer is that the separation of church and state has not denied the political realm a religious dimension. Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be strictly private affairs, there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere.<sup>14</sup>

As already noted in preceding chapters, Bellah refers to this "public religious dimension"<sup>15</sup> as American civil religion, which, since the country's inception, has influenced the United States to a great extent, for instance, by fueling the American belief in progress or by legitimizing American independence from Great Britain.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the religious faith, which is woven through the American creed, has

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<sup>12</sup> U.S. Constitution, Bill of Rights, Article III.

<sup>13</sup> *Jefferson*, Letter to the Messrs. Nehemiah Dodge, Ephraim Robbins, and Stephen S. Nelson, a Committee of the Danbury Baptist Association in the State of Connecticut, 468.

<sup>14</sup> *Bellah*, *Civil Religion in America*, 3f.

<sup>15</sup> *Bellah*, *Civil Religion in America*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> In order to convince the world of the legitimacy of American revolutionists' actions as well as of the legitimacy of the emerging new country, God is referenced four times in the Declaration of Independence.

served as a unifying element by providing Americans with a sense of identity, meaning, and purpose. What also should not be forgotten is that it provides the common creed of Americans with “a religious blessing.”<sup>17</sup> As Alexis Tocqueville already noted in his nineteenth-century masterwork *Democracy in America*, “In the United States, religion [...] is mingled with all the habits of the nation and all the feelings of patriotism, whence it derives a peculiar force.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, it has also never been the intention to shield the state from religious entanglements or the influence of religious rhetoric. Instead, the objective behind the First Amendment was to protect religious faiths of all sorts from political or governmental tutelage and dependence as well as to guard against the emergence of a single denomination at the national level like in Britain. This has resulted in a manifold variety of religious groups on equal footing. Similarly, also the religious values and beliefs incorporated in the American creed cannot be ascribed to a particular denomination or confession. Although Bellah notes that the country’s civil religion is “not antithetical to and indeed share[s] much in common with Christianity,” it is “neither sectarian nor in any specific sense Christian.”<sup>19</sup> The American civil religion is predominantly shaped by the central idea of a God “with a special concern for America” who is “not only rather ‘unitarian,’ he is also on the austere side, much more related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love.”<sup>20</sup> Inferring from this idea of America as a divinely favored country, Americans harbor the conviction that they represent God’s chosen people. Due to this firm belief, and the consequent special status of Americans, the notion of exceptionalism is implicit in the national ideology. This idea of the United States as an exceptional country based on the nation’s sense of divine chosenness is, in turn, linked to another concept “that lies very deep in the American tradition, namely the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God’s will on earth. This was the motivating spirit of those who founded America, and it has been present in every generation since.”<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, Bellah has identified three other civil religious themes, the first of which is the idea and portrayal of the United States as the “new Israel” and the equation of the country’s development with the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt. As Bellah

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<sup>17</sup> Huntington, *Who Are We?*, 103.

<sup>18</sup> Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. 2, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, 5.

explains, “the Revolution [...] was seen as the final act of the Exodus from the old lands across the waters. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were the sacred scriptures and Washington the divinely appointed Moses who led his people out of the hands of tyranny.”<sup>22</sup> Within this myth, Europe represents Egypt, while America is viewed as “the promised land” where “God has led his people to establish a new sort of social order that shall be a light unto all the nations.”<sup>23</sup>

The next topos, according to Bellah, is the product of the second major event in American history, which, due to its significance and severity, also fundamentally shaped and altered American self-conception as well as the country’s “ideological consensus.”<sup>24</sup> “With the Civil War,” Bellah states, “a new theme of death, sacrifice, and rebirth enters the new civil religion [which] is symbolized in the life and death of Lincoln.”<sup>25</sup> Here, despite the obvious parallels between Christian themes and the religious imagery used when Lincoln, for instance, is equated with Jesus and described as “God’s chosen one,”<sup>26</sup> both Robert Lowell<sup>27</sup> and Robert Bellah<sup>28</sup> discount the idea that this carries any sectarian implications. Instead, both agree on the notion that the meaning of Lincoln’s symbolic significance “goes beyond sect or religion.”<sup>29</sup>

The final concept in Bellah’s analysis of American civil religion is referred to as “the third time of trial”<sup>30</sup> by Bellah himself and is concerned with “the problem of responsible action in a revolutionary world”<sup>31</sup> as well as the role as a guiding “light to all nations”<sup>32</sup> and inspiring example for other countries’ aspirations. This notion of the United States’ exemplary function traces back to John Winthrop’s sermon *A Model of Christian Charity*, which he delivered en route to North America in 1630. In this pivotal work of the colonial period, Winthrop introduced the biblical image of “a city upon a hill,” with “the eyes of all people”<sup>33</sup> upon it, which provided the Puritan settlers of the

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<sup>22</sup> Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> William H. Herndon, quoted in Eddy, *The Kingdom of God and the American Dream*, 162.

<sup>27</sup> see Lowell, *On the Gettysburg Address*, 88f.

<sup>28</sup> see Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, *Civil Religion in America*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Lowell, *On the Gettysburg Address*, 89.

<sup>30</sup> Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, 18.

<sup>33</sup> Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity*, 40f.

New England colonies with a “mythic yet supremely influential mission.”<sup>34</sup> However, it needs to be pointed out that the Puritan influence is not limited to this theme alone. Also the images of Americans as God’s chosen people and new Israelites have their origin in the religious topoi and symbolism of the Puritans’ vision. This is due to the fact that numerous aspects of the American creed took root in the Puritan soil of New England and exemplify the lasting influence of the historic Puritan errand, as Sacvan Bercovitch has documented:

It was that larger, American vision which the Puritans bequeathed to the culture. This was their legacy: a system of sacred-secular symbols (New Israel, American Jerusalem) for a people intent on progress; a set of rituals of anxiety and control that could at once encourage and confine the energies of free enterprise; a rhetoric of mission so broad in its implications, and so specifically American in its application, that it could facilitate the transitions from Puritan to Yankee, and from errand to manifest destiny and the dream.<sup>35</sup>

Before the Puritan ideals were utilized to serve as a “mode of consensus”<sup>36</sup> for all American people, they had fulfilled a similar purpose on a smaller scale, when they helped to ideologically knit together the Puritan settlers of Massachusetts Bay Colony. Derived from the biblical concept of exodus as well as the myth of a New Canaan, America “signaled the long-awaited new heaven and new earth of the millennium”<sup>37</sup> to Puritans. Consequently, they saw it as their duty to turn the American wilderness into a garden and to “make it blossom as the rose.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, the errand did not only provide the Puritans with a rationale to justify their expansive aspirations, but also, and probably more importantly, ensured internal control and discipline among the “unruly, [...] volatile group of dissenters [...] by rooting personal identity in social enterprise.”<sup>39</sup> This way, the leading figures of the New England colonies were able to “endorse individualism without promoting anarchy.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, another unifying feature of the Calvinistic-Puritan tradition helped to accomplish the objective of creating commonality amid aspirations for individuality, as Lipset points out:

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<sup>34</sup> *Beasley*, *You, the People*, 30.

<sup>35</sup> *Bercovitch*, *The Rites of Assent*, 10f.

<sup>36</sup> *Bercovitch*, *The Rites of Assent*, 8.

<sup>37</sup> *Bercovitch*, *The Rites of Assent*, 8.

<sup>38</sup> *Bercovitch*, *The Rites of Assent*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> *Bercovitch*, *The Rites of Assent*, 9.

<sup>40</sup> *Bercovitch*, *The Rites of Assent*, 9.



By making every man God's agent, ascetic Protestantism made each individual responsible for the state of morality in the society; and by making the congregation a disciplinary agent it helped to prevent any one individual from assuming that his brand of morality was better than others.<sup>41</sup>

In the end, it took until the eighteenth century for the Puritan errand to also take on greater significance outside the New England colonies, when the religious revival and the growing aspirations for freedom and national independence led to an extension of its scope. Thus, the concept of representative selfhood became a vital source of shared values and beliefs for all Protestant settlers during the time of the Great Awakening and, even more so, over the course of the French and Indian War. Ultimately, the final stage in the Americanization and secularization of the Puritan rhetoric of consensus was initiated by the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. To quote Bercovitch:

With the Revolution, the Puritan vision flowered into the myth of America. For the errand itself was rooted in biblical myth. However eccentric their interpretations, the Puritans had relied on the authority of scripture. No matter how flagrantly they distorted sacred history to justify their experience, they were appealing, finally, to Christian tradition. The Revolutionary Whigs took the justification, rather than the tradition behind it, as their authority. No matter how piously they invoked scripture they were appealing not to Christian tradition, but to the series of recent events through which they defined the American experience. Their symbology centered on the act of migration; their text was the progress from theocracy to republic; their source of prophecy, the pilgrimage of the representative American.<sup>42</sup>

In other words, the secularized form of Puritanism provided the nation with a source of shared symbols and beliefs. Since the country was made up of people of diverse origins who lacked a common past, the early United States was in dire need of unifying patriotic values which provided identity and cohesion. Thus, the civic religious ideals derived from Puritan doctrine fell on fertile ground and have served as a sort of "civic glue" in U.S. society until today. To put it in the words of Bercovitch:

It gave the country a past and a future in sacred history, rendered its civic institutions a fulfillment of prophecy, elevated its so-called true inhabitants, the Anglo-Saxon Protestants who had immigrated within the past century or so, to the status of God's

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<sup>41</sup> *Lipset*, *The First New Nation*, 96.

<sup>42</sup> *Bercovitch*, *The Rites of Assent*, 14.

chosen, and declared the vast territories around them to be their promised land. Above all, it grounded the myth in a central symbol, “America” [...].<sup>43</sup>

This Puritan-inspired rhetoric of consensus with its religious myths and imagery fused with humanist principles and ideals, developed by Enlightenment philosophers such as Hume, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, to form the national ideology. Its religiously inspired moral standards and self-images as well as the sense of mission and purpose derived therefrom represent the religious dimension of the American creed, which has exercised a powerful and unbroken influence on U.S. culture. In light of religion’s continuous relevance and importance for identity construction, it is hardly surprising that Ted Widmer concludes that the “single theme that unites all inaugurations [...] is the need to explore the central mystery of God’s relationship to the American experiment.”<sup>44</sup> Due to the ubiquity and importance of this preoccupation with God in inaugural addresses, this aspect will constitute the first part of my analysis of religious themes and myths in presidential inaugurations.

### **3.2. The mention of God in inaugural addresses**

The tradition of presidents to mention God in their respective inaugural address(es) dates back to George Washington, who is the originator of a few religious customs featured in inaugural addresses. However, the one ritual instituted by Washington, which probably immediately catches the eye of every student of inaugural addresses, is the practice to end the speech with an appeal to God. Washington initiated this inaugural tradition when he referred to God as “the benign Parent of the Human Race” who “has been pleased to favor the American people” in the concluding lines of his first inaugural address in which he also sought to secure “His divine blessing”<sup>45</sup> for the future of the young nation. Remarkably, apart from a few exceptions, all of Washington’s successors followed his example and also concluded their respective inaugural address(es) with either a plea or at least a reference to God.

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<sup>43</sup> *Bercovitch*, *The Rites of Assent*, 16.

<sup>44</sup> *Widmer*, *So Help Me God*, 38.

<sup>45</sup> *Washington*, *First Inaugural Address*, April 30, 1789.

However, it might come as a surprise that Washington himself was one of those who broke with this tradition when he gave his second inaugural address in 1793. This speech, which is also the shortest inaugural address ever delivered by an American president, does not only feature an ending which is not in accordance with the tradition, but is also the only one out of fifty-seven inaugurals which “dares” not to mention God at all. Aside from Washington himself, James Madison was the first president who ended his inaugural speech without referencing God, since he rather used the final paragraph of his second inaugural to justify the War of 1812 and to remind his compatriots that everyone had to bear “his share of the common burden.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, his second inaugural address belongs to the group of inaugurals in which presidents eschewed mentioning God in the final lines due to the fact that they ended their speeches by either trying to justify or avert belligerent actions, or to prepare the people for the exertions they were obliged to make in order to support the respective war. Since I will show later on that other presidents conversely did utilize God in their war rhetoric to legitimate decisions, it is certainly interesting that a group of presidents attempted to achieve such ends without invoking God. Other representatives of the latter category, apart from Madison’s second inaugural address, are Abraham Lincoln’s first, given at the outbreak of the American Civil War,<sup>47</sup> William McKinley’s second inaugural, held while U.S. soldiers fought Filipino revolutionaries in the Philippine-American War, and Woodrow Wilson’s second inaugural speech, delivered one month before the United States entered World War I.

Beyond that, there were also a couple of presidents who refrained from complying with the tradition of ending the inaugural address by referencing God during times of peace. William Henry Harrison, for instance, in the longest of all inaugural speeches lasting for one hour and forty minutes and held in the midst of a brutal snowstorm in 1841, protracted his speech even further after his appeal to God by adding yet another paragraph in order to bid goodbye from his audience. Thirty-two years later, Ulysses Grant offered his take on God’s relationship to his country already in the tenth paragraph of his second inaugural address, since he considered it more important to end his speech by adverting to the “abuse and slander scarcely ever equaled in political

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<sup>46</sup> *Madison*, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1813.

<sup>47</sup> For the same reason, God also plays only a minor role in the final paragraph of Lincoln’s second inaugural address.

history”<sup>48</sup> which he had to endure during the first term of his presidency. Also still in the nineteenth century, Benjamin Harrison used the last paragraph of his inaugural speech to articulate his feeling of optimism for the future of his country, when he proclaimed:

Each State will bring its generous contribution to the great aggregate of the nation's increase. And when the harvests from the fields, the cattle from the hills, and the ores of the earth shall have been weighed, counted, and valued, we will turn from them all to crown with the highest honor the State that has most promoted education, virtue, justice, and patriotism among its people.<sup>49</sup>

Since then, however, only Theodore Roosevelt, Dwight D. Eisenhower (in his second inaugural speech), and Jimmy Carter have left out God in the closing remarks of their respective inaugural address. Roosevelt instead referenced the Founding Fathers, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln, while reminding his compatriots of the “lofty ideal”<sup>50</sup> of the American creed. Eisenhower, by contrast, at least maintained the religious character of the concluding portion of his speech by phrasing it like a prayer, while Carter opted to dedicate his final paragraph to America’s future goals and the American Dream.

All other successors of Washington followed the pattern of America’s first inaugural address when they concluded their own. However, the consensus among American presidents ends when it comes to naming God. But despite the myriad of names that American presidents have used to address God, there are a couple of common tendencies worth noting. For instance, the Founding Father generation of U.S. presidents interestingly displayed a reluctance to use the word “God” in their inaugural addresses. In fact, James Monroe was the only American president before the second half of the nineteenth century who used it in his second inaugural speech, while all his predecessors and successors until Franklin Pierce in 1853 avoided calling God by name and instead resorted to what Widmer calls “a dizzying array of divine identifiers.”<sup>51</sup> This contingent of names includes “that Being who is supreme over all, the Patron of Order, the Fountain of Justice, and the Protector in all ages of the world of virtuous

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<sup>48</sup> *Grant*, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1873.

<sup>49</sup> *B. Harrison*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1889.

<sup>50</sup> *T. Roosevelt*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1905.

<sup>51</sup> *Widmer*, *So Help Me God*, 38.

liberty,”<sup>52</sup> “that Infinite Power which rules the destinies of the universe,”<sup>53</sup> “that Almighty Being whose power regulates the destiny of nations,”<sup>54</sup> “His overruling providence,”<sup>55</sup> or “that Power whose providence mercifully protected our national infancy,”<sup>56</sup> to name just a few. While presidential references to God in the middle of the nineteenth century were dominated by expressions that either included the adjective “divine,” the noun “providence” or both, several later presidents, beginning with Grant’s first inaugural address, followed the example of Monroe and thus the expression “Almighty God” became increasingly popular. Between 1869 and 1961 it was used by seven different presidents (the aforementioned Grant, James A. Garfield, Grover Cleveland, William Howard Taft, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, and Dwight D. Eisenhower) in the concluding paragraph of their inaugural addresses, while four additional presidents (Benjamin Harrison, William McKinley, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy) used it at least once at some point in their inaugural addresses. However, after Kennedy, its usage in inaugurals went out of fashion again and has remained so ever since. Consequently, Kennedy was the last president who uttered the words “Almighty God” in an inaugural address. However, two decades after Kennedy, Ronald Reagan initiated a new inaugural tradition that has remained unbroken until today, when he concluded his first inaugural address with the phrase “God bless you.”<sup>57</sup> Four years later, in his second inaugural, he added “[...] and God bless America”<sup>58</sup> to the initial expression. Since then, every president has ended his inaugural speech with either “God bless you” and/or “God bless America” or a slight variation of the two (e.g. Barack Obama concluded his second inaugural in 2013 address by saying, “God bless you, and may He forever bless these United States of America”<sup>59</sup>).

The “God bless you” phrase introduced by Reagan perfectly illustrates how the purpose of the inaugurals’ final paragraph as well as the presidents’ intentions behind it have changed over the last nearly 230 years. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, presidents, based on their belief in the special status of Americans as God’s chosen

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<sup>52</sup> J. Adams, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1797.

<sup>53</sup> Jefferson, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801.

<sup>54</sup> Madison, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1809.

<sup>55</sup> J. Q. Adams, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1825.

<sup>56</sup> Jackson, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1829.

<sup>57</sup> Reagan, First inaugural Address, January 20, 1981.

<sup>58</sup> Reagan, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 1985.

<sup>59</sup> Obama, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 2013.

people, strived to invoke God in order to ensure His blessing, guidance, and protection for the future, or at least for the length of their respective tenure. A representative example from this time period would be James Knox Polk's 1845 inaugural address, which he concluded by "humbly supplicating that Divine Being who has watched over and protected our beloved country from its infancy to the present hour to continue His gracious benedictions upon us, that we may continue to be a prosperous and happy people."<sup>60</sup> The only exception of the nineteenth century to this trend is provided by James Monroe's second inaugural address delivered in 1821, since he refrained from appealing to God or asking for His blessings in his speech due to his "firm reliance on the protection of the Almighty God."<sup>61</sup> In other words, Monroe was that convinced in the nation's divine chosenness and his conviction that he could confidently reckon on God's support was that strong that he did not feel the necessity to beseech the Lord. Ninety-two years later, in the final paragraph of his first inaugural address, Woodrow Wilson in a similar fashion also took God's help on the eve of World War I more or less for granted, and thus instead seized the opportunity to "summon all honest men, all patriotic, all forward-looking men, to [his] side," before he ended his speech with a promise: "God helping me, I will not fail them, if they will but counsel and sustain me!"<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, the tradition to request God's aid in inaugural addresses went out of vogue for good in the second half of the twentieth century, and thus John F. Kennedy in 1961 was the last president who invoked "His blessing and his help."<sup>63</sup> Following Kennedy's inauguration, the presidents' appeal to God permanently gave way to a reference to God and/or an expression of the presidents' firm belief in God's support for the United States. Thus, Nixon simply declared in 1969 that Americans were "firm in [their] faith" and expressed his "confidence in the will of God."<sup>64</sup> Twelve years later, Ronald Reagan ultimately relegated the mentioning of God's name in the last paragraph of the inaugural address to a farewell line when he chose to end the concluding portion of his first inaugural address with the phrase "God bless you."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> *Polk*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1845.

<sup>61</sup> *Monroe*, Second Inaugural Address, March 5, 1821.

<sup>62</sup> *Wilson*, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1913.

<sup>63</sup> *Kennedy*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.

<sup>64</sup> *Nixon*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1969.

<sup>65</sup> *Reagan*, First inaugural Address, January 20, 1981.

### 3.3. Americans as God's chosen people

While the invocation of God at the end of the inaugural address has been subject to notable variations from Washington to Obama, there is one constant in this rhetorical tradition which has survived since 1789 and consequently unites all presidents, namely their eagerness to express the firm belief that Americans constitute God's chosen people. This notion traces back to the Puritan settlers and their perception of America as a "covenanted nation"<sup>66</sup> and was taken up by Washington in his first inaugural address. Since then it has permeated the history of the inaugural tradition due to the fact that virtually nobody, who has assumed the office of the presidency, did not address the idea of the United States as a divinely favored country in one form or another during his inaugural speech.

Just a few lines into the second paragraph of his first inaugural address, George Washington drew on the American nation's self-image as God's chosen people, when he noted that "[n]o people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand which conducts the affairs of men more than those 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."<sup>67</sup> As Washington's words clearly demonstrate, the American nation's sense of divine chosenness is closely linked to the conviction that their undertaking is protected and guided by God, which also entails the perception that the ill-equipped and badly-armed colonialists could only be victorious in the American Revolutionary War, since divine providence led them to triumph over the mighty British army. Numerous other presidents reinforced this idea with their inaugural addresses in which they uttered their conviction that "there must have been God's intent in the making of this new-world Republic,"<sup>68</sup> since He "mercifully protected [America's] national infancy"<sup>69</sup> when the Founding Fathers fought "that great conflict [...] under the guidance of a manifest and beneficent Providence."<sup>70</sup>

Following Washington, basically all of his successors echoed the notion of exceptionalism, based on the idea that the United States is a country favored by God, in

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<sup>66</sup> *Cristi*, *From Civil to Political Religion*, 49.

<sup>67</sup> *Washington*, *First Inaugural Address*, April 30, 1789.

<sup>68</sup> *Harding*, *Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1921.

<sup>69</sup> *Jackson*, *First Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1829.

<sup>70</sup> *Pierce*, *Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1853.

some form in their respective inaugural address(es). Thus, I will focus on those statements which stand out from the crowd for one reason or another.

In 1801, Thomas Jefferson added a new facet to the discussion of the religiously informed concept of exceptionalism in inaugural speeches, since he did not simply address the nation's divine chosenness or God's support for the American experiment per se. Instead, he focused on the geographical implications and interpretation of Americans' self-perception as God's favorite children:

Kindly separated by nature and a wide ocean from the exterminating havoc of one quarter of the globe; [...] possessing a chosen country, with room enough for our descendants to the thousandth and thousandth generation [...] – with all these blessings, what more is necessary to make us a happy and a prosperous people?<sup>71</sup>

The central idea of Jefferson's remarks was that Americans had been bestowed a divine gift in the form of a vast and chosen land in a favorable geographical position located at an ample distance to Europe, which many of Jefferson's contemporaries considered a source of danger and den of iniquity. In addition to its vastness and geographical separateness as a guarantee of security, God's present to the nation also embodied the oft-used image of a land of plenty, as exemplified by James Buchanan's 1857 inaugural address in which he rejoiced that "[n]o nation in the tide of time has ever been blessed with so rich and noble an inheritance as we enjoy in the public lands."<sup>72</sup> Consequently, God's gift inspired Americans with a feeling of security, autarky, and independence.

Based on the nation's self-image as God's chosen people, presidents also thought of God as the originator of the Union as well as the United States' sacrosanct documents and its institutions. This notion was also voiced by James Buchanan in his inaugural address in which he labeled the Constitution and the Union "the richest political blessings which Heaven has ever bestowed upon any nation."<sup>73</sup> In a similar way, Warren G. Harding uttered his belief "in the divine inspiration of the founding fathers," since "there must have been God's intent in the making of this new-world Republic."<sup>74</sup> Martin Van Buren, in his inaugural address, called this divine inspiration

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<sup>71</sup> *Jefferson*, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801.

<sup>72</sup> *Buchanan*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1857.

<sup>73</sup> *Buchanan*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1857.

<sup>74</sup> *Harding*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1921.



“the spirit that actuated the venerated fathers of the Republic.”<sup>75</sup> What all three presidents have in common is that these passages taken from their inaugural addresses reflect the typical American notion that the Founding Fathers were inspired by God’s Holy Spirit when they drafted the nation’s founding documents – the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. This idea, which still prevails among Americans today, is also the reason why both James Buchanan and William McKinley referred to the Almighty as “the God of our fathers”<sup>76</sup> in their inaugural addresses. Since the “first new nation”<sup>77</sup> and model republic as well as its institutions consequently epitomize God’s intent and vision, Martin Van Buren was convinced that “if administered in the true form, character, and spirit in which they were established, they are abundantly adequate to preserve to us and our children the rich blessings already derived from them, to make our beloved land for a thousand generations that chosen spot where happiness springs from a perfect equality of political rights.”<sup>78</sup>

However, not only the republic and its documents and institutions as well as its geographical amenities and location have been interpreted as God’s gifts by the presidents in their inaugural speeches. The same also holds true for the shared values and ideals which constitute the foundation of the American creed. Already in the Declaration of Independence, its main author, Thomas Jefferson, together with the other members of the Continental Congress declared, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>79</sup> This natural law philosophy, which implies that every human being has got God-given privileges by virtue of his or her belonging to the human race, has been echoed in inaugural addresses. William Henry Harrison already expressed this idea, as the only president from the nineteenth century, when he explained in his 1841 inaugural address that the American citizen derives his rights “from no charter granted by his fellow-man. Instead he claims them because he is himself a man, fashioned by the same Almighty hand as the rest of his species and entitled to a full share of the blessings with which He

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<sup>75</sup> *Van Buren*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1837.

<sup>76</sup> *Buchanan*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1857; *McKinley*, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1897.

<sup>77</sup> *Lipset*, *The First New Nation*, 2.

<sup>78</sup> *Van Buren*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1837.

<sup>79</sup> U.S. Declaration of Independence, Preamble (1776).

has endowed them.”<sup>80</sup> However, it is interesting to note that, following Harrison, the specific set of shared universal values and principles encapsulated in the American creed was not again explicitly linked to God in an inaugural speech until the twentieth century. In 1953 and 1961, respectively, Dwight D. Eisenhower and his successor John F. Kennedy were the first presidents who again uttered the conviction in their inaugurals that the rights of every human being do not spring from the benevolence of governments but were given to man by God:

At such a time in history, we who are free must proclaim anew our faith. This faith is the abiding creed of our fathers. It is our faith in the deathless dignity of man, governed by eternal moral and natural laws. This faith defines our full view of life. It establishes, beyond debate, those gifts of the Creator that are man's inalienable rights, and that make all men equal in His sight.<sup>81</sup>

The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe – the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.<sup>82</sup>

Richard Nixon, in his second inaugural address, argued along the same lines, when he identified the need “to insure the God-given right of every American to full and equal opportunity”<sup>83</sup> as one of his central goals for his second term as president. Moreover, Barack Obama, in 2013, became the first president who articulated features of the natural law philosophy in both of his inaugural addresses. While, in his first inaugural, he simply expressed his understanding of “the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness” as a “precious gift,”<sup>84</sup> he dealt with this theme more extensively in his second inaugural speech:

What makes us exceptional – what makes us American – is our allegiance to an idea articulated in a declaration made more than two centuries ago: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of

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<sup>80</sup> W. H. *Harrison*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1841.

<sup>81</sup> *Eisenhower*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1953.

<sup>82</sup> *Kennedy*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.

<sup>83</sup> *Nixon*, Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 1973.

<sup>84</sup> *Obama*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009.

Happiness.” Today we continue a never-ending journey to bridge the meaning of those words with the realities of our time. For history tells us that while these truths may be self-evident, they have never been self-executing; that while freedom is a gift from God, it must be secured by His people here on Earth.<sup>85</sup>

Obama quoted from the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence here in order to promote unity and identity among Americans as well as to highlight America’s uniqueness and the country’s exceptional character. In addition to this, however, Obama also further developed the notion of natural law by pointing out that the meaning of this passage of the Declaration needed to be brought into accordance with the realities of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, the final sentence of this quote echoed the closing statement of Kennedy’s inaugural address “here on earth God's work must truly be our own.”<sup>86</sup> However, while Kennedy, first and foremost, had articulated his conviction that it is the duty of Americans to carry out God’s will on earth,<sup>87</sup> Obama was more concerned with the God-given rights and equality of human beings and thereby reminded his audience that these rights and ideals had to be secured by the people themselves.

After having discussed how the shared ideals and values as well as the Union, its central documents, and favorable geographical position have been religiously interpreted in inaugural addresses, based on the nation’s self-conception as God’s chosen people, it also needs to be stressed that the inauguration ceremony itself, as a central ritual of the civil religion, has also been frequently connected to God by the nation’s highest political leaders. Presidents so far have done this in very similar ways, since they share the tendency to present the inauguration of a president as a solemn rite of passage in which God is present. Of course, the consensus among presidents regarding this aspect makes sense, since such an “important ceremonial event” which “reaffirms [...] the religious legitimation of the highest political authority”<sup>88</sup> can only adequately fulfill its purpose if it is imagined as taking place in the presence of God. The first example for religiously charged rhetoric in an inaugural speech depicting the inaugural ceremony as an event closely watched by God dates back to John Quincy

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<sup>85</sup> *Obama*, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 2013.

<sup>86</sup> *Kennedy*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.

<sup>87</sup> for more information see chapter 3.5.

<sup>88</sup> *Bellah*, *Civil Religion in America*, 4.

Adam's 1825 inaugural address, in which he welcomed his audience with the following words:

I appear, my fellow-citizens, in your presence and in that of Heaven to bind myself by the solemnities of religious obligation to the faithful performance of the duties allotted to me in the station to which I have been called.<sup>89</sup>

However, Adams remained the only president before the American Civil War who described the inauguration as a ceremony in which God is present. For the entire nineteenth century, there is only one other similar example, provided by Benjamin Harrison, who, however, only implied but not explicitly talked about God's presence at the inauguration ceremony:

Surely I do not misinterpret the spirit of the occasion when I assume that the whole body of the people covenant with me and with each other today to support and defend the Constitution and the Union of the States, to yield willing obedience to all the laws and each to every other citizen his equal civil and political rights. Entering thus solemnly into covenant with each other, we may reverently invoke and confidently expect the favor and help of Almighty God [...].<sup>90</sup>

In other words, God had to be present at Harrison's inauguration or, at least, watch it from afar in order to take notice of the mutual covenant between the President and his people through which they "invoke[d] and [...] expect[ed] the favor and help" of God.

While in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, suggesting either explicitly or implicitly that the presidential inauguration took place in God's presence was definitely an exception and an anomaly, this changed after World War I. Beginning with Herbert Hoover in 1929, the idea of an inaugural ceremony in the presence of God became a regular trope, as the following examples show:

This occasion is not alone the administration of the most sacred oath which can be assumed by an American citizen. It is a dedication and consecration under God to the highest office in service of our people.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> J. Q. *Adams*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1825.

<sup>90</sup> B. *Harrison*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1889.

<sup>91</sup> *Hoover*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1929.

As I stand here today, having taken the solemn oath of office in the presence of my fellow countrymen – in the presence of our God – I know that it is America's purpose that we shall not fail.<sup>92</sup>

We are summoned by this honored and historic ceremony to witness more than the act of one citizen swearing his oath of service, in the presence of God. We are called as a people to give testimony in the sight of the world to our faith that the future shall belong to the free.<sup>93</sup>

[W]e observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom – symbolizing an end, as well as a beginning – signifying renewal, as well as change. For I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago.<sup>94</sup>

My fellow countrymen, on this occasion, the oath I have taken before you and before God is not mine alone, but ours together. We are one nation and one people. Our fate as a nation and our future as a people rest not upon one citizen, but upon all citizens.<sup>95</sup>

I have taken an oath today in the presence of God and my countrymen to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States. To that oath I now add this sacred commitment: I shall consecrate my office, my energies, and all the wisdom I can summon, to the cause of peace among nations.<sup>96</sup>

My fellow Americans, the oath I have sworn before you today, like the one recited by others who serve in this Capitol, was an oath to God and country, not party or faction – and we must faithfully execute that pledge during the duration of our service.<sup>97</sup>

As all these examples illustrate, presidents since Herbert Hoover have frequently established a connection between God and the inauguration ceremony, particularly concerning the oath of office, which constitutes its central part. Thus, presidents have not only taken the oath, with which they swore to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States,”<sup>98</sup> before the people, but also before God. As a consequence, the presidents’ obligations, beyond the Constitution, extended not only to their fellow compatriots but also to God, as Robert N. Bellah has pointed out:

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<sup>92</sup> F. *Roosevelt*, Fourth Inaugural Address, January 20, 1945.

<sup>93</sup> *Eisenhower*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1953.

<sup>94</sup> *Kennedy*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.

<sup>95</sup> *Johnson*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1965.

<sup>96</sup> *Nixon*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1969.

<sup>97</sup> *Obama*, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 2013.

<sup>98</sup> U.S. Constitution, Article II, Section 1.

In American political theory, sovereignty rests, of course, with the people, but implicitly, and often explicitly, the ultimate sovereignty has been attributed to God. This is the meaning of the motto, “In God we trust,” as well as the inclusion of the phrase “under God” in the pledge to the flag. What difference does it make that sovereignty belongs to God? Though the will of the people as expressed in the majority vote is carefully institutionalized as the operative source of political authority, it is deprived of an ultimate significance. The will of the people is not itself the criterion of right and wrong. There is a higher criterion in terms of which this will can be judged; it is possible that the people may be wrong. The president's obligation extends to the higher criterion.<sup>99</sup>

The obligations of Americans and, in particular, their presidents to God will also be a focal point in the following chapters, since they will deal with concepts and themes closely related to the idea of the United States as God's chosen nation as well as their application in inaugural addresses.

### **3.4. God's special purpose for America**

As already discussed, the American self-image as new Israelites has been identified as one of the main themes of the civil religion by Robert N. Bellah.<sup>100</sup> Consequently, it is hardly surprising that Americans' perception of their country as the “new Israel” and the equation of the Pilgrim Fathers' journey to the New World with the Israelites' exodus from Egypt have also found their way into the inaugural genre. To quote Thomas Jefferson:

I shall need, too, the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life; who has covered our infancy with His providence and our riper years with His wisdom and power[.]<sup>101</sup>

Based on their self-conception as new Israelites, Americans are convinced that similar to the special purpose God had intended for the Israelites, according to the Old

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<sup>99</sup> Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, 4.

<sup>100</sup> see Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, 9.

<sup>101</sup> Jefferson, *Second Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1805.

Testament, His plans also include a special destiny for them. This vision was already sounded by James Monroe in his 1817 inaugural speech in which he discussed what would be necessary to ensure that Americans would not fail “under the favor of a gracious Providence, to attain the high destiny which seems to await [them].”<sup>102</sup> Yet it took until the turn of the century for this idea to become more prominent in presidential rhetoric. Furthermore, inaugural addresses of the fin de siècle and twentieth century not only contained more passages expressing the belief in God’s unique destiny for the United States, but presidents in this period also gave concrete content to this religiously informed perception. In 1897, William McKinley stressed the importance of an educated and morally good citizenry as a prerequisite to be able to live up to God’s lofty ideal, when he stipulated that, “Illiteracy must be banished from the land if we shall attain that high destiny as the foremost of the enlightened nations of the world which, under Providence, we ought to achieve.”<sup>103</sup> This passage of William McKinley’s first inaugural speech effectively captures the blend of American exceptionalism with the notion of American destiny, which resulted in the idea that it was God’s destiny for the United States to occupy a high place in the world’s history. In the following years, the country’s victory in World War I along with the consequent increase in self-confidence further reinforced this assertion. As Warren G. Harding put it in 1921:

One cannot stand in this presence and be unmindful of the tremendous responsibility. The world upheaval has added heavily to our tasks. But with the realization comes the surge of high resolve, and there is reassurance in belief in the God-given destiny of our Republic.<sup>104</sup>

However, in the interwar period this still meant that the United States should first and foremost serve as “an inspiration and example” to which the world could “rivet its hopeful gaze.”<sup>105</sup> Although President Harding also stressed that it was important that his country acted as “the highest agency of strengthening good will and promoting accord on both continents,” he was still anxious to point out “the wisdom of the inherited policy of noninvolvement in Old World affairs.”<sup>106</sup> This changed after World War II when the United States no longer confined itself to the role of a shining example to the

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<sup>102</sup> *Monroe*, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1817.

<sup>103</sup> *McKinley*, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1897.

<sup>104</sup> *Harding*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1921.

<sup>105</sup> *Harding*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1921.

<sup>106</sup> *Harding*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1921.

rest of the world and permanently abandoned its policy of isolationism. Instead, postwar rhetoric proclaimed that it was God's purpose for America to lead the world. Dwight D. Eisenhower expressed this sentiment in both of his inaugural addresses. In 1953, he said concerning the goal to ensure concord and harmony among all free people, "To produce this unity, to meet the challenge of our time, destiny has laid upon our country the responsibility of the free world's leadership."<sup>107</sup> Four years later, he heralded the end of his second inaugural with the words, "And so the prayer of our people carries far beyond our own frontiers, to the wide world of our duty and our destiny."<sup>108</sup> From that point on, inaugural addresses tied the belief in the country's divine destiny to the notion of America as the highest example to the world, which other nations should emulate, as well as the to the idea of the United States as leader of the free world. In addition, presidents were eager to emphasize that their country and fellow compatriots gradually approximated the divine ideal in their endeavor to fulfill God's destiny for them. Ronald Reagan, for instance, in his second inaugural address in 1985 proudly looked back upon the positive development of American society to a people "united in a common cause,"<sup>109</sup> which he suggested was part of God's plan for the United States:

As an older American, I remember a time when people of different race, creed, or ethnic origin in our land found hatred and prejudice installed in social custom and, yes, in law. There is no story more heartening in our history than the progress that we have made toward the "brotherhood of man" that God intended for us.<sup>110</sup>

### **3.5. The duty of Americans to carry out God's will**

Apart from the ever more prevalent idea of the God-given purpose and destiny of the United States in late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century inaugurals, presidents, starting with Warren G. Harding, also increasingly expressed their belief that they saw it as their country's duty to carry out God's will on earth. This is interesting because, as Robert N. Bellah has pointed out, Americans' commitment to act as God's agents in this

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<sup>107</sup> *Eisenhower*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1953.

<sup>108</sup> *Eisenhower*, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 1957.

<sup>109</sup> *Reagan*, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 1985.

<sup>110</sup> *Reagan*, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 1985.



world “lies very deep in the American tradition” and “was the motivating spirit of those who founded America.”<sup>111</sup> However, it was not until the twentieth century that this sentiment became more common and was more explicitly expressed in inaugural addresses. Before that, nineteenth-century presidents had rather expressed a reliance on God's support and divine guidance, for instance when Franklin Pierce had stressed “the nation's humble, acknowledged dependence upon God and His overruling providence.”<sup>112</sup> The first president that reminded his audience that to rely on God's help and grace was not enough, since the Lord's work on earth had to be accomplished by mankind, in particular by Americans, was Warren G. Harding. Despite the United States' unwillingness to join the League of Nations, he declared in his inaugural in 1921 that “America is ready to [...] promote that brotherhood of mankind which must be God's highest conception of human relationship.”<sup>113</sup> This notion was reiterated and further developed by his successor Calvin Coolidge who proclaimed:

America seeks no earthly empire built on blood and force. No ambition, no temptation, lures her to thought of foreign dominions. The legions which she sends forth are armed, not with the sword, but with the cross. The higher state to which she seeks the allegiance of all mankind is not of human, but of divine origin. She cherishes no purpose save to merit the favor of Almighty God.<sup>114</sup>

Coolidge suggested here that America harbored no aspirations for territorial expansion or desire to wage war. According to him, the exact opposite was true, since his country's mission was a benevolent as well as altruistic one in which God's will unfolded through the unselfish deeds of American soldiers. As Anne Morelli points out, this practice to pass off one's own foreign policy undertakings as holy missions, as applied here by Coolidge, is a very common one, especially in politicians' war rhetoric.<sup>115</sup> That presidents feel the need to emphasize that God sides with their country during the struggles of war is demonstrated by Franklin D. Roosevelt, who concluded his fourth inaugural address in January 1945 with the words, “So we pray to Him now for the vision to see our way clearly [...] to the achievement of His will to peace on

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<sup>111</sup> *Bellah*, *Civil Religion in America*, 5.

<sup>112</sup> *Pierce*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1853.

<sup>113</sup> *Harding*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1921.

<sup>114</sup> *Coolidge*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1925.

<sup>115</sup> see *Morelli*, *Principes élémentaires de propagande de guerre*, 65-68.

earth.”<sup>116</sup> Four years earlier, shortly before the United States had formally entered World War II following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt had already touched on this theme when he had stated that “[a]s Americans, we go forward, in the service of our country, by the will of God.”<sup>117</sup>

In contrast to the nation’s own belligerent activities, which are associated with a divine plan that is put into action by the United States, the wartime enemy is depicted as debauched and godless. This becomes perfectly evident in the inaugural addresses of Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower given during the Cold War era. While the former dubbed Communism as a “false philosophy” that denied the people “the right to believe in and worship God,”<sup>118</sup> the latter reiterated and reinforced this notion by juxtaposing Communism in opposition to the American civil religion and consequently referring to its adherents as “enemies of [the American] faith [who] know no god but force” and torture “whatever defies them, [...] especially the truth.”<sup>119</sup> Four years later, Eisenhower, moreover, called Communism a “power dark in purpose.”<sup>120</sup>

The only exception to this tendency to stress that one’s own war campaigns are always justified and therefore have God’s blessing while the opponent is portrayed as wicked and sinful is provided by Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address. However, it needs to be noted that Lincoln presented and explained the belligerent activities here differently, because, in this case, the war opponents were rebelling compatriots and not a foreign enemy. Since Lincoln never recognized the secession of the Confederate States, in his view, “Northerners and Southerners were equally citizens,” while he regarded “Jefferson Davis’s army as an outlaw band preying on the South.”<sup>121</sup> Lincoln delivered his second inaugural in 1865 during the waning months of the Civil War, after two sections of God’s chosen nation had been fiercely fighting each other for more than four years. Lincoln pointed to the resulting religious dilemma caused by the fact that both adversaries of this domestic strife claimed the roles of God’s soldiers for themselves, when he noted:

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<sup>116</sup> F. *Roosevelt*, Fourth Inaugural Address, January 20, 1945.

<sup>117</sup> F. *Roosevelt*, Third Inaugural Address, January 20, 1941.

<sup>118</sup> *Truman*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1949.

<sup>119</sup> *Eisenhower*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1953.

<sup>120</sup> *Eisenhower*, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 1957.

<sup>121</sup> *Wills*, Lincoln at Gettysburg, 133f.

Both 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 fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.<sup>122</sup>

According to Lincoln, both parties asked the same God for support and both interpreted passages from the same Bible to vindicate their actions. However, while both were convinced that they had one and the same God on their side, Lincoln suggested that the prayer of neither party had been fully answered. So, although he would have had every reason to cite the Union's imminent victory as evidence that God had sided with them all along and to pin the blame for the war exclusively on the Confederation, Lincoln refrained from pointing fingers. Instead, he went in a different direction and sought to reconcile the two sides by pointing out that the "Almighty has His own purposes,"<sup>123</sup> which the human race cannot fully comprehend.

Following Eisenhower and his anti-Communist rhetoric, John F. Kennedy uttered the quintessential statement that expressed the belief that it is the obligation of the United States to carry out God's will on earth as perfectly as no other inaugural passage:

With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.<sup>124</sup>

Although the belief that God's work on earth must be accomplished by Americans has always been a central concept of the civil religion and, consequently, "has been present in every generation,"<sup>125</sup> no president before had articulated this conviction as clearly as Kennedy did. The same sentiment, albeit in an attenuated form, was also prevalent in 1973, when Richard Nixon urged his compatriots in his second inaugural, "Let us go forward from here confident in hope, strong in our faith in one another, sustained by our faith in God who created us, and striving always to serve His purpose."<sup>126</sup> In contrast to

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<sup>122</sup> *Lincoln*, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865.

<sup>123</sup> *Lincoln*, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865.

<sup>124</sup> *Kennedy*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.

<sup>125</sup> *Bellah*, *Civil Religion in America*, 5.

<sup>126</sup> *Nixon*, Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 1973.

Nixon's nebulous remark, Ronald Reagan was more specific in his second inaugural address concerning the question what "His purpose" exactly encapsulated:

And may He continue to hold us close as we fill the world with our sound – sound in unity, affection, and love – one people under God, dedicated to the dream of freedom that He has placed in the human heart, called upon now to pass that dream on to a waiting and hopeful world.<sup>127</sup>

By emphasizing the nation's calling to bring the "dream of freedom" to a "waiting and hopeful world," President Reagan reverted to the idea of America's Manifest Destiny. This theory had first and foremost played a vital role in vindicating expansionism on the American continent during the nineteenth century. It was based on the conviction that it was the United States' destiny "to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions."<sup>128</sup> After the Union's victory in the Civil War, which was interpreted as the final triumph of the American idea as a governmental system of, by, and for the people and as a nation of immigrants who are united as one people, the idea of Manifest Destiny took on a broader scope and was used to promote American expansion overseas. Consequently, it served as a rationale for the country's imperialistic aspirations in Cuba, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. In the wake of the two world wars and influenced by the United States' heightened status as leader of the free world, the American self-conception transformed from a shining example for all the world to follow, to a benevolent nation with the mission to spark the light of freedom, equality, human dignity, and democracy in every corner of the world. Exactly this sentiment was voiced by Ronald Reagan in 1985, when he said that the nation was "called upon now to pass that dream on to a waiting and hopeful world." That their mission as God's executive body demanded from foreign-policy endeavors to always serve altruistic purposes and to help the people of this world was emphasized by George H. W. Bush four years later in his prayer to God, which he incorporated in his inaugural address:

Make us strong to do Your work, willing to heed and hear Your will, and write on our hearts these words: "Use power to help people." For we are given power not to advance

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<sup>127</sup> *Reagan*, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 1985.

<sup>128</sup> *O'Sullivan*, Annexation, 5.

our own purposes, nor to make a great show in the world, nor a name. There is but one just use of power, and it is to serve people Help us to remember it, Lord. Amen.<sup>129</sup>

However, this prayer was not only an expression of his understanding of public service as a noble profession and his belief that God had charged the American people with the task of implementing His divine plan. In addition, Bush implied that “to make [...] gentler the face of the world” is something quintessentially American, since “America is never wholly herself unless she is engaged in high moral principle.”<sup>130</sup> His son George W. Bush resonated that sentiment in 2001:

[T]he stakes for America are never small. If our country does not lead the cause of freedom, it will not be led. [...] America remains engaged in the world by history and by choice, shaping a balance of power that favors freedom. [...] Where there is suffering, there is duty. [...] And I can pledge our nation to a goal: When we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side. [...] We are not this story’s author, who fills time and eternity with his purpose. Yet his purpose is achieved in our duty, and our duty is fulfilled in service to one another.<sup>131</sup>

George W. Bush here tied the ideals of freedom and compassion to the biblical story of the Good Samaritan before finishing off with the oft-sounded inaugural theme that God’s work on earth manifests itself through the selfless deeds of Americans. Finally, also Bush’s successor Barack Obama, reflected on his nation’s role as God’s adjutants in his first inaugural address, when he stated, “This is the source of our confidence – the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny.”<sup>132</sup>

### **3.6. The duty of Americans to live virtuous and devout lives**

However, presidents have interpreted their nation’s self-appointed status as God’s chosen people not only as a unique and exceptional circumstance that secured them certain advantages and privileges and, beyond that, imposed on them the duty to carry out God’s will on earth. In addition to this, some of them have also uttered the

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<sup>129</sup> G. H. W. *Bush*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1989.

<sup>130</sup> G. H. W. *Bush*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1989.

<sup>131</sup> G. W. *Bush*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 2001.

<sup>132</sup> *Obama*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009.

conviction that Americans' divinely favored position as God's favorite children also demanded that they lived moral and virtuous lives according to God's commandments, since "the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained."<sup>133</sup> Apart from George Washington's statement, this view can primarily be found in nineteenth-century inaugural addresses. In 1841, William Henry Harrison deemed the occasion of his inauguration "sufficiently important and solemn to justify me in expressing to my fellow-citizens [...] a thorough conviction that sound morals, religious liberty, and a just sense of religious responsibility are essentially connected with all true and lasting happiness."<sup>134</sup> In other words, somebody who is a morally good person and lives a virtuous and pious life has all the prerequisites to experience genuine and sustained happiness. Unlike Harrison, Zachary Taylor, who assumed the presidency in 1849, interpreted Americans' imperative to live according to God's principles not primarily as a religious version of the Pursuit of Happiness. Instead, Taylor's interpretation was a lot closer to Washington's, since he also did not view a righteous and prudent way of life, first and foremost, as a direct way to true and enduring happiness, but rather as a basic requirement to merit God's favor. However, in contrast to the nation's first president, Taylor focused in his interpretation above all on the prevention of moral evils and abuses of power within the political sphere:

Let us invoke a continuance of the same protecting care which has led us from small beginnings to the eminence we this day occupy, and let us seek to deserve that continuance by prudence and moderation in our councils, by well-directed attempts to assuage the bitterness which too often marks unavoidable differences of opinion, by the promulgation and practice of just and liberal principles, and by an enlarged patriotism, which shall acknowledge no limits but those of our own widespread Republic.<sup>135</sup>

Similar to Washington and Taylor, William McKinley was also convinced that God would not forsake the American people "so long as we obey His commandments and walk humbly in His footsteps."<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, Abraham Lincoln, in his first inaugural, pointed out that to obey God's rules and to follow His guidance does not only secure

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<sup>133</sup> *Washington*, First Inaugural Address, April 30, 1789.

<sup>134</sup> *W. H. Harrison*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1841.

<sup>135</sup> *Taylor*, Inaugural Address, March 5, 1849.

<sup>136</sup> *McKinley*, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1897.

God's favor and/or lead to a happy life, but also serves as the best remedy to political crises and social struggles. Facing the demise of the Union after seven Southern slave states had declared their secession from the United States, he urged his countrymen to not go to war and to take no "precipitate action [...] [since] [i]ntelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him who has never yet forsaken this favored land are still competent to adjust in the best way all our present difficulty."<sup>137</sup>

Conversely, some presidents felt the need to emphasize that human vices, evils, and the failure to observe God's commandments, can evoke God's punishment. The first president who painted the picture of a punitive God in his inaugural address was John Quincy Adams:

To admit that this picture has its shades is but to say that it is still the condition of men upon earth. From evil – physical, moral, and political – it is not our claim to be exempt. We have suffered sometimes by the visitation of Heaven through disease[.]<sup>138</sup>

Forty years later, Abraham Lincoln utilized the same religious imagery of a punishing God in an attempt to reunite a nation fractured after four years of Civil War:

If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses 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 offense 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 bondsman'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."<sup>139</sup>

According to Lincoln, both the northern and southern states shared the guilt of slavery and consequently both sides had to endure the pain and destruction of war. However, he implied that the people should not only regard the Civil War as a form of punishment. Although he called the war a "mighty scourge," he also expressed the view that it was a

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<sup>137</sup> *Lincoln*, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861.

<sup>138</sup> J. Q. *Adams*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1825.

<sup>139</sup> *Lincoln*, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865.

necessary process for the nation to cleanse itself from the sin of slavery. Trusting in the righteousness of God's judgments, Lincoln stated that if the Almighty deemed it necessary, America would ride out the continuation of the war until the prosperity resulting from 250 years of slavery had disappeared and the blood drawn by the whip from slaves had been paid in full by the blood drawn by the sword of warfare.

That the notion prevails among Americans that their special status as God's chosen people not only does not exempt them from God's punishment, but that, to the contrary, God judges them particularly critically, becomes evident in one of the few inaugural passages from the twentieth century which deals with Americans' obligation to make the way in which they live their lives consistent with God's principles and commandments:

If we fail now, we shall have forgotten in abundance what we learned in hardship: that democracy rests on faith, that freedom asks more than it gives, and that the judgment of God is harshest on those who are most favored.<sup>140</sup>

This quotation is taken from Lyndon B. Johnson's 1965 inaugural address and back then served as a reminder to the country that under the "covenant of justice, liberty, and union we have become a nation – prosperous, great, and mighty. [...] But we have no promise from God that our greatness will endure."<sup>141</sup> Thus, Americans steadily need to "seek greatness with the sweat of our hands and the strength of our spirit" and indulge in the "excitement of [...] becoming, trying, probing, falling, resting, and trying again."<sup>142</sup>

The other passage from a twentieth-century inaugural address reflecting on the duty of Americans to live virtuous and pious lives stems from Richard Nixon, who in 1973 stated with regard to his second presidential term, "We shall answer to God, to history, and to our conscience for the way in which we use these years."<sup>143</sup> By citing history as one of the instances the United States needs to justify its actions to, Nixon also implied that his country played the role of a primary actor on the world-historical stage and had an exemplary function for the rest of the world. This sentiment, which

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<sup>140</sup> *Johnson*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1965.

<sup>141</sup> *Johnson*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1965.

<sup>142</sup> *Johnson*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1965.

<sup>143</sup> *Nixon*, Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 1973.



traces back to the Puritan imagery of a “city upon a hill,” will be the subject of investigation in the following chapter.

### 3.7. The United States as a “city upon a hill”

Closely related to Americans’ self-image as God’s chosen people and their self-imposed duty to live their lives in accordance with God's laws is the nation’s self-perception of a “city upon a hill” and leading light for other countries. This concept goes back to Puritan leader John Winthrop and his sermon *A Model of Christian Charity*, which is also known as the “city upon a hill” sermon. Winthrop is reputed to have given this famous sermon aboard a ship named *Arbella* en route to colonial America. In his speech, which was later published as an essay and widely circulated, Winthrop proclaimed that Puritans were the new Israelites led by the Almighty “to found a new Kingdom of God on virgin soil.”<sup>144</sup> In addition, the sermon gave rise to the idea of a covenant between God and the Puritan settlers, which united the latter in their common mission to “agitate, demonstrate, live, and fulfill a moral example.”<sup>145</sup> This way, Winthrop laid the foundation for the American nation’s identity as the great exception among the countries of the world as well as for its role as the most inspiring and shining example of morale and virtue in the world. However, in his sermon, Winthrop also added a word of warning:

For we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God and all professors for God’s sake; we shall shame the faces of many of God’s worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into Curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land where we are going.<sup>146</sup>

According to Winthrop, the Puritan endeavor was watched by the entire world and if it failed, it would make their enemies revel in malicious glee and empower them to put to

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<sup>144</sup> Collins, *Religion and Class*, 103.

<sup>145</sup> Tjalve, *Realist Strategies of Republican Peace*, 24.

<sup>146</sup> Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity*, 40f.

shame God's servants. Furthermore, a potential failure on the Puritans' part would also imply that they had failed to realize the plan of a New Canaan on the American continent. The consequent mythically charged duties imposed on the Puritan settlers of the New England colonies provided them with a special purpose or mission that would later evolve into a "mode of consensus"<sup>147</sup> for the entire nation and thereby lay the foundation for the notion of exceptionalism. As a dominant and frequently articulated leitmotif, it is still drawn on by American politicians today in order to emphasize the country's uniqueness and exemplary function. As a consequence, the imagery of America as a "city upon a hill" has also appeared as a regular trope in inaugural addresses.

Interestingly, the Puritan myth of the "city upon a hill" was primarily employed to position the United States as a political role model representing the first modern republic in a world then dominated by monarchies. America's role as a moral example to the world, on the other hand, was of less significance in inaugurals, especially in the nineteenth century. Only Thomas Jefferson, apart from labeling it the "world's best hope,"<sup>148</sup> said about the American government that it would do "no act which it would be unwilling the whole world should witness"<sup>149</sup> and thereby also emphasized the country's moral role model function. Successive presidents, by contrast, rather focused on the American experiment, which, according to them, had to prove to the entire world that a government of, by, and for the people was practical and capable of surviving in the long run. For this reason, President Andrew Jackson, in the midst of the Nullification Crisis of 1832/33, called on the States of the Union to put aside selfish motives and considerations in favor of the common cause:

The eyes of all nations are fixed on our Republic. The event of the existing crisis will be decisive in the opinion of mankind of the practicability of our federal system of government. Great is the stake placed in our hands; great is the responsibility which must rest upon the people of the United States. Let us realize the importance of the attitude in which we stand before the world.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> *Bercovitch*, *The Rites of Assent*, 8.

<sup>148</sup> *Jefferson*, *First Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1801.

<sup>149</sup> *Jefferson*, *Second Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1805.

<sup>150</sup> *Jackson*, *Second Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1833.

However, it was not only their country's mission to furnish proof that their constitutional republic can serve as a permanent monument to the success of self-government. In addition, the presidents considered it the task of their government to be "peacefully instrumental by its example in the extension of civil and religious liberty throughout the world."<sup>151</sup> But before this goal could be attained, advocates of the Union had to fear that the simmering conflict between free states and slave states could escalate and thus "extinguish the fire of liberty, which warms and animates the hearts of happy millions and invites all the nations of the earth to imitate our example."<sup>152</sup> For this reason, presidents during the 1850s, when the conflicts over slavery frequently divided Congress, elevated the Union to the "noblest field ever opened"<sup>153</sup> and placed it at the center of the "city upon a hill" imagery. To quote Franklin Pierce:

The oppressed throughout the world [...] have turned their eyes hitherward, not to find those lights extinguished or to fear lest they should wane, but to be constantly cheered by their steady and increasing radiance. [...] With the Union my best and dearest earthly hopes are entwined. [...] What becomes of the noblest field ever opened for the advancement of our race in religion, in government, in the arts, and in all that dignifies and adorns mankind? From that radiant constellation which both illumines our own way and points out to struggling nations their course, let but a single star be lost, and, if these be not utter darkness, the luster of the whole is dimmed.<sup>154</sup>

The victory of the Union troops in the Civil War was interpreted as the final triumph of America as the "first new nation,"<sup>155</sup> after Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg in 1863 had deemed the war the ultimate test of "whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure."<sup>156</sup> Encouraged in their faith in the political system after the acid test of the Civil War had been successfully passed, presidents praised before the world their impeccable republican model government. While doing so, they also interpreted the successful resolution of political crises as proof of the flawlessness of the American governmental system. Rutherford B. Hayes, for example, proudly

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<sup>151</sup> *Buchanan*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1857.

<sup>152</sup> *Polk*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1845.

<sup>153</sup> *Pierce*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1853.

<sup>154</sup> *Pierce*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1853.

<sup>155</sup> *Lipset*, *The First New Nation*, 2.

<sup>156</sup> *Lincoln*, Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863.

commented on the settlement of domestic political turmoil after the disputed election of 1876, which had required the decision of a Congressional committee:

It has been reserved for a government of the people, where the right of suffrage is universal, to give to the world the first example in history of a great nation, in the midst of the struggle of opposing parties for power, hushing its party tumults to yield the issue of the contest to adjustment according to the forms of law.<sup>157</sup>

While the application of the “city upon a hill” myth in order to emphasize America’s function as a political paragon was fairly popular in nineteenth-century inaugural addresses, America’s role as a moral example to the world was hardly mentioned after Thomas Jefferson’s second inaugural address in 1805. Interestingly enough, however, the few other sporadic references to the American self-image of an inspiring model of morale and righteousness in nineteenth-century presidential inaugurals were all linked to the topic of Native Americans. Accordingly, William Henry Harrison declared in 1841 with respect to the “proposed course of conduct” regarding “the intercourse with our aboriginal neighbors” that he could “conceive of no more sublime spectacle [...] than a rigid adherence to the principles of justice on the part of a powerful nation in its transactions with a weaker and uncivilized people whom circumstances have placed at its disposal.”<sup>158</sup> In a similar way, President Grant suggested thirty-two years later that a more compassionate and forbearing treatment of the Native American population would have a positive effect on America’s image in the world, since he also proceeded on the assumption that the rest of the Western world would closely watch every development in the United States:

Our superiority of strength and advantages of civilization should make us lenient toward the Indian. The wrong inflicted upon him should be taken into account and the balance placed to his credit. The moral view of the question should be considered and the question asked, Can not the Indian be made a useful and productive member of society by proper teaching and treatment? If the effort is made in good faith, we will stand better before the civilized nations of the earth and in our own consciences for having made it.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> *Hayes*, Inaugural Address, March 5, 1877.

<sup>158</sup> W. H. *Harrison*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1841.

<sup>159</sup> *Grant*, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1873.

Apart from these few instances, however, the moral interpretation of the “city upon a hill” imagery was neither referenced nor discussed by nineteenth-century presidents. Likewise, it was of little importance in inaugural addresses of the early twentieth century. The political interpretation of the “city upon a hill” myth, on the other hand, was fairly common in inaugural addresses from the outset of the twentieth century. In 1905, Theodore Roosevelt pointed out that the American experiment was not only unique and watched by the eyes of all people because America constituted the first modern republic, but also because of the enormous size of his country and the fact that it comprised such a large number of manifold states of different character and with diverging interests. To put it in the words of Roosevelt, “[n]ever before have men tried so vast and formidable an experiment as that of administering the affairs of a continent under the forms of a Democratic republic.”<sup>160</sup> Nevertheless, or even because of the fact that America represented a federal union of diverse states, Roosevelt stated that the United States “[had] become a great nation” and cited the country’s “growth in wealth, in population, and in power” as well as its “extraordinary industrial development” and “marvelous material well-being”<sup>161</sup> as proof of that. However, he also noted that material assets, wealth, or a rise in power must not serve as the primary motivating forces for the American nation. Instead, the country needed to stay true to its principles and keep the commitment to a bigger cause at the forefront of its mission:

Upon the success of our experiment much depends, not only as regards our own welfare, but as regards the welfare of mankind. If we fail, the cause of free self-government throughout the world will rock to its foundations, and therefore our responsibility is heavy, to ourselves, to the world as it is today, and to the generations yet unborn.<sup>162</sup>

In other words, the nation’s twenty-sixth president called upon his compatriots to resist the perils that plague “every nation that rises to greatness.”<sup>163</sup> Further, he urged the country not to get caught up in selfish pursuits or thinking and not to lose sight of the part it had to play in the grander scheme of things. Instead, America needed to remain devoted to its special mission as a political role model, an exemplar of lived democracy,

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<sup>160</sup> T. *Roosevelt*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1905.

<sup>161</sup> T. *Roosevelt*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1905.

<sup>162</sup> T. *Roosevelt*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1905.

<sup>163</sup> T. *Roosevelt*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1905.

freedom, and justice, as well as a beacon for all those people around the world who sought these ideals.

During World War I, however, President Woodrow Wilson's words indicated that the United States' days as a passive role model for the world were numbered and that the country instead would have to become a stronger player on the international stage, where it should "perform [its duty] in the face of all men."<sup>164</sup> Although it needed another major war on a global scale for the nation to permanently abandon its policy of isolationism, Wilson's second inaugural address already heralded America's transition from an isolationist "city upon a hill" to a nation that regarded itself as a benevolent leader and an active role model for others and as such sought to shape world politics and lead by example. In this context, America's self-imposed function as a shining example of morale and virtue also started to take on a more significant role in inaugural speeches, since American presidents were eager to point out that although the United States led an active foreign policy, it "desire[d] neither conquest nor advantage" and "wish[ed] nothing that can be had only at the cost of another people"<sup>165</sup> – a message with which Woodrow Wilson also concluded his second inaugural:

The shadows that now lie dark upon our path will soon be dispelled, and we shall walk with the light all about us if we be but true to ourselves – to ourselves as we have wished to be known in the counsels of the world and in the thought of all those who love liberty and justice and the right exalted.<sup>166</sup>

In contrast to that, the inaugural address of Wilson's successor Warren G. Harding was saturated with the traditional isolationist "city upon a hill" imagery. By utilizing this image, he once again positioned the United States as the highest political and moral role model which does not want to become engaged in foreign affairs and which other nations should emulate in their quest for lasting peace on earth:

We have seen the world rivet its hopeful gaze on the great truths on which the founders wrought. We have seen civil, human, and religious liberty verified and glorified. In the beginning the Old World scoffed at our experiment; today our foundations of political and social belief stand unshaken, a precious inheritance to ourselves, an inspiring example of freedom and civilization to all mankind. [...] Perhaps we can make no more

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<sup>164</sup> *Wilson*, Second Inaugural Address, March 5, 1917.

<sup>165</sup> *Wilson*, Second Inaugural Address, March 5, 1917.

<sup>166</sup> *Wilson*, Second Inaugural Address, March 5, 1917.

helpful contribution by example than prove a Republic's capacity to emerge from the wreckage of war. [...] [W]e have riveted the gaze of all civilization to the unselfishness and the righteousness of representative democracy [...]. When the Governments of the earth shall have established a freedom like our own and shall have sanctioned the pursuit of peace as we have practiced it, I believe the last sorrow and the final sacrifice of international warfare will have been written.<sup>167</sup>

Despite the fact that Harding praised the United States' accomplishments as an active role model during World War I that had proven to the world "the unselfishness and the righteousness of representative democracy," he regarded serving as an example as America's most "helpful contribution" to the world. His successors thought along the same lines and rather echoed Thomas Jefferson than Woodrow Wilson in their inaugural addresses by picturing their country as a beacon of freedom and the world's best hope, as done, for instance, by Calvin Coolidge and Franklin D. Roosevelt:

Under the eternal urge of freedom we became an independent Nation. A little less than 50 years later that freedom and independence were reasserted in the face of all the world, and guarded, supported, and secured by the Monroe doctrine.<sup>168</sup>

The Almighty God has blessed our land in many ways. He has given our people stout hearts and strong arms with which to strike mighty blows for freedom and truth. He has given to our country a faith which has become the hope of all peoples in an anguished world.<sup>169</sup>

However, after the end of World War II, isolationism was regarded as a policy that had failed, since, despite its goal to not become entangled in foreign conflicts, the United States had been dragged into two major wars. Thus, President Harry S. Truman was convinced that the United States needed to permanently abandon its isolationist policy of the past and replace it with a more internationalist vision of America's role in world politics. Consequently, he urged his country in his inaugural address to step forward as leader of the free world, since "[i]n this time of doubt, [the peoples of the earth] look to the United States as never before for good will, strength, and wise leadership."<sup>170</sup> Similar to Woodrow Wilson, Truman viewed the United States as a country to which

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<sup>167</sup> *Harding*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1921.

<sup>168</sup> *Coolidge*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1925.

<sup>169</sup> *F. Roosevelt*, Fourth Inaugural Address, January 20, 1945.

<sup>170</sup> *Truman*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1949.

other nations reverted their gaze not primarily because of its exemplary political system, but rather because they wanted the United States to act and lead.

Wilson's and Truman's modern interpretation of the "city upon a hill" imagery, which pictured America as an active role model that was dedicated to shaping world politics and, in doing so, leading by example, also endured in post-World War II inaugural addresses after Truman. This had an effect on how the inaugural event itself was portrayed in the presidents' speeches. In the second half of the twentieth century, the inaugural ceremony was no longer just conceived as an "act of one citizen swearing his oath of service, in the presence of God."<sup>171</sup> Instead, it was presented as a historic ritual of worldwide importance in which all Americans "are called as a people to give testimony in the sight of the world to our faith that the future shall belong to the free."<sup>172</sup> By doing so, Americans not only demonstrated unity and their belief in the American faith before "a watching world," but also performed an institutional rite of passage that "[i]n the eyes of many in the world, [...] is nothing less than a miracle."<sup>173</sup>

Having said this, it needs to be mentioned that alongside the post-isolationist reinterpretation of the "city upon a hill" myth, the traditional "city upon a hill" imagery, which portrayed the United States as a political role model and a beacon for freedom, equality, and justice, was still utilized by American presidents after World War II. However, now that the United States embraced its role as an active world power, it was acceptable for presidents to point out that America, in addition to its role as a paragon to emulate, also served as the "world's political messiah"<sup>174</sup> seeking to bring freedom, democracy, and prosperity to other nations:

Everywhere we see the seeds of the same growth that America itself has known. The American experiment has, for generations, fired the passion and the courage of millions elsewhere seeking freedom, equality, and opportunity. And the American story of material progress has helped excite the longing of all needy peoples for some satisfaction of their human wants. These hopes that we have helped to inspire, we can help to fulfill.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> *Eisenhower*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1953.

<sup>172</sup> *Eisenhower*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1953.

<sup>173</sup> *Reagan*, First inaugural Address, January 20, 1981.

<sup>174</sup> *Gamble*, *The War for Righteousness*, 22.

<sup>175</sup> *Eisenhower*, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 1957.



However, President Eisenhower and, after the lessons of the Vietnam War, President Carter reminded their compatriots that the United States could only truly fulfill its responsibility as a benevolent leader, who provided help and support to other countries, if the nation set a good example for others in dealing with its own domestic as well as foreign affairs:

For this truth must be clear before us: whatever America hopes to bring to pass in the world must first come to pass in the heart of America. The peace we seek, then, is nothing less than the practice and fulfillment of our whole faith among ourselves and in our dealings with others.<sup>176</sup>

Our Nation can be strong abroad only if it is strong at home. And we know that the best way to enhance freedom in other lands is to demonstrate here that our democratic system is worthy of emulation. To be true to ourselves, we must be true to others. We will not behave in foreign places so as to violate our rules and standards here at home, for we know that the trust which our Nation earns is essential to our strength.<sup>177</sup>

In addition, the inaugural addresses of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, illustrate that presidents in the second half of the twentieth century tended to revert to the traditional “city upon a hill” imagery whenever they were eager to strengthen the country’s beleaguered self-esteem amidst a national crisis in an attempt to change the nation’s course and to bring about a more glorious period of strength and prosperity again:

Let us pledge together to make these next four years the best four years in America's history, so that on its 200th birthday America will be as young and as vital as when it began, and as bright a beacon of hope for all the world.<sup>178</sup>

And as we renew ourselves here in our own land, we will be seen as having greater strength throughout the world. We will again be the exemplar of freedom and a beacon of hope for those who do not now have freedom.<sup>179</sup>

Furthermore, presidents of the post-World War II era also employed the “city upon a hill” myth whenever the national cause was at stake and the aim was to promote unity among Americans by emphasizing the country’s uniqueness, exemplary function, and leading role in the world. Bill Clinton, in 1993, accomplished this end in a very neat and

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<sup>176</sup> *Eisenhower*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1953.

<sup>177</sup> *Carter*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1977.

<sup>178</sup> *Nixon*, Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 1973.

<sup>179</sup> *Reagan*, First inaugural Address, January 20, 1981.

skillful manner by establishing a link between the inaugural celebration and the traditional image of the “city upon a hill.”

From this joyful mountaintop of celebration, we hear a call to service in the valley. We have heard the trumpets. We have changed the guard. And now, each in our way, and with God's help, we must answer the call.<sup>180</sup>

America's forty-fourth president, Barack Obama, seized the opportunity of speaking from “this joyful mountaintop of celebration” not only to address his fellow compatriots but to deliver a message explicitly to the rest of the world:

And so to all the other peoples and governments who are watching today, from the grandest capitals to the small village where my father was born: know that America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman, and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and we are ready to lead once more.<sup>181</sup>

However, in order to live up to its self-imposed ideals, such as serving as the world's leading nation and benevolent superpower which brings freedom, equality, prosperity, and democracy to every corner of the world, individual sacrifices for the larger cause and greater good were necessary. This issue will be the focal point of the next chapter.

### **3.8. The rhetoric of sacrifice in the inaugural genre**

According to Robert N. Bellah, “[w]ith the Civil War, a new theme of death, sacrifice, and rebirth” entered the civil religion, and since then has been “symbolized in the life and death of Lincoln.”<sup>182</sup> In the wake of the war's end and Lincoln's assassination, the nation's “‘martyred president,’ was linked to the war dead, those who ‘gave the last full measure of devotion.’”<sup>183</sup> Consequently, the new trope of sacrifice became “indelibly written into the civil religion” and the symbolism springing from this new theme “soon found both physical and ritualistic expression,”<sup>184</sup> as Bellah has shown:

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<sup>180</sup> *Clinton*, First Inaugural Address, January 21, 1993.

<sup>181</sup> *Obama*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009.

<sup>182</sup> *Bellah*, *Civil Religion in America*, 10.

<sup>183</sup> *Bellah*, *Civil Religion in America*, 11.

<sup>184</sup> *Bellah*, *Civil Religion in America*, 11.

The great number of the war dead required the establishment of a number of national cemeteries. Of these, Gettysburg National Cemetery, which Lincoln's famous address served to dedicate, has been overshadowed only by the Arlington National Cemetery. Begun somewhat vindictively on the Lee estate across the river from Washington, partly with the end that the Lee family could never reclaim it, it has subsequently become the most hallowed monument of the civil religion. Not only was a section set aside for the confederate dead, but it has received the dead of each succeeding American war. It is the site of the one important new symbol to come out of World War I, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier; more recently it has become the site of the tomb of another martyred President and its symbolic eternal flame.<sup>185</sup>

Intriguingly, however, a close examination of presidential inaugurals reveals that, contrary to Bellah's assertion, the theme of sacrifice already found its way into the inaugural genre before the Civil War. Andrew Jackson took it up in his second inaugural address in 1833 by quoting a passage from a letter, written by George Washington to Arthur St. Clair, in order to point out that every American needs to make sacrifices for the greater good of society:

Constantly bearing in mind that in entering into society "individuals must give up a share of liberty to preserve the rest," it will be my desire so to discharge my duties as to foster with our brethren in all parts of the country a spirit of liberal concession and compromise, and, by reconciling our fellow-citizens to those partial sacrifices which they must unavoidably make for the preservation of a greater good, to recommend our invaluable Government and Union to the confidence and affections of the American people.<sup>186</sup>

Twenty years later, those "partial sacrifices [...] for the preservation of a greater good," were attributed to the Founding Fathers by President Franklin Pierce in his 1853 inaugural speech. By emphasizing that they had "dealt with things as they were presented to them in a spirit of self-sacrificing patriotism,"<sup>187</sup> Pierce, like many other politicians before and after him, portrayed the Founding Fathers as paragons of self-sacrifice and patriotism, whose behavior should be emulated.

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<sup>185</sup> *Bellah*, *Civil Religion in America*, 11.

<sup>186</sup> *Jackson*, *Second Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1833.

<sup>187</sup> *Pierce*, *Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1853.

Apart from the examples provided by Jackson and Pierce, however, no inaugural address in the nineteenth century dealt with the subject of sacrifice. Since they can thus be considered exceptional cases, and considering the frequency of this trope in the inaugural addresses of the twentieth and twenty-first century, it can be noted that Bellah's assertion that the theme of sacrifice became a central concept of the civil religion only following the Civil War, is also confirmed by the canon of inaugural addresses. However, the new trope did not establish itself permanently in the inaugural genre immediately after the conclusion of the Civil War. Instead, it took almost another four decades until William McKinley, as the first president after Franklin Pierce, sounded the theme of sacrifice again in an inaugural speech, when he argued that the "path of progress" required "effort and sacrifice"<sup>188</sup> on the part of the people. Twenty years later, Warren G. Harding looked back at the Civil War as "a baptism of sacrifice and blood"<sup>189</sup> which effaced the only ambiguity of the Constitution, namely whether the institution of slavery should be outlawed or not. During the 1930s and following the outbreak of World War II, the trope of sacrifice entrenched itself permanently in the inaugural genre and its application reached its first climax with Franklin D. Roosevelt. In his first inaugural speech in 1933, he stressed the importance of unity among Americans and called his compatriots to a realization of national aspirations which transcended their individual ambitions, since, in his view, progress depended on an ethic of reciprocity:

If I read the temper of our people correctly, we now realize as we have never realized before our interdependence on each other; that we cannot merely take but we must give as well; that if we are to go forward, we must move as a trained and loyal army willing to sacrifice for the good of a common discipline, because without such discipline no progress is made, no leadership becomes effective. We are, I know, ready and willing to submit our lives and property to such discipline, because it makes possible a leadership which aims at a larger good.<sup>190</sup>

In 1941, while the war already raged in Europe and Asia, Roosevelt, in his third inaugural address, prepared an American nation, that had so far remained uninvolved in World War II, for the potential sacrifices it would have to make in case of an attack on

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<sup>188</sup> *McKinley*, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1901.

<sup>189</sup> *Harding*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1921.

<sup>190</sup> *F. Roosevelt*, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933.

the country, or if the United States were drawn into the war for a different reason. He did this by referencing America's duty to preserve and protect "the sacred fire of liberty and [...] the republican model of government,"<sup>191</sup> outlined in George Washington's first inaugural address, before concluding:

If we lose that sacred fire – if we let it be smothered with doubt and fear – then we shall reject the destiny which Washington strove so valiantly and so triumphantly to establish. The preservation of the spirit and faith of the Nation does, and will, furnish the highest justification for every sacrifice that we may make in the cause of national defense.<sup>192</sup>

While Roosevelt had presented the sacrifices of the people as a necessity in the name of progress and self-defense as well as in the name of the preservation of the American experiment and its ideals, Dwight D. Eisenhower, in his first inaugural address, delivered eight years after the successful conclusion of World War II, was more concerned with the sacrifices necessary to fulfill America's role as a benevolent leader in world politics. This change of emphasis illustrates that the United States in the meantime had abandoned its policy of isolationism and had replaced it with an internationalist vision that called for a prominent role on the global stage. It is thus hardly surprising that Eisenhower portrayed the United States as the country that had been entrusted "the care of freedom" and declared that Americans consequently "must be willing, individually and as a Nation, to accept whatever sacrifices may be required"<sup>193</sup> of them. At the same time, however, as John F. Kennedy pointed out, both Americans and citizens of the world should demand from the president and his government "the same high standards of strength and sacrifice"<sup>194</sup> which they ask of them. With this in mind, he pledged 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."<sup>195</sup> Nevertheless, the nation had to learn the hard way, through failed foreign policy endeavors such as the war in Vietnam, that the willingness to make sacrifices was not the remedy for every problem they encountered. Furthermore,

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<sup>191</sup> *Washington*, First Inaugural Address, April 30, 1789, quoted in: *F. Roosevelt*, Third Inaugural Address, January 20, 1941.

<sup>192</sup> *F. Roosevelt*, Third Inaugural Address, January 20, 1941.

<sup>193</sup> *Eisenhower*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1953.

<sup>194</sup> *Kennedy*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.

<sup>195</sup> *Kennedy*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.

Americans also had to realize that their belief in feasibility and their country's self-imposed role as a benevolent leader that aimed to act as a Good Samaritan on a global scale and promoted liberty throughout the world also had its limits. This is reflected in Jimmy Carter's 1977 inaugural address who modestly asserted:

We have learned that "more" is not necessarily "better," that even our great Nation has its recognized limits, and that we can neither answer all questions nor solve all problems. We cannot afford to do everything, nor can we afford to lack boldness as we meet the future. So, together, in a spirit of individual sacrifice for the common good, we must simply do our best.<sup>196</sup>

However, Carter's sobriety and humbleness did not leave a lasting impact on the inaugural genre and, four years later, the rhetoric of the United States as the leading nation in the world in charge of defending and protecting liberty on the entire globe was back in full swing:

As for the enemies of freedom, those who are potential adversaries, they will be reminded that peace is the highest aspiration of the American people. We will negotiate for it, sacrifice for it; we will not surrender for it – now or ever.<sup>197</sup>

In addition to his pledge to freedom, Ronald Reagan concluded his speech with the theme of sacrifice, when he pointed to the fact that the inaugural ceremony was occurring for the first time on the west portico of the Capitol, allowing a marvelous view of the monuments to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln, before he subsequently connected the sacrifices of Americans from former times with the challenges and required sacrifices of today:

Beyond those monuments to heroism is the Potomac River, and on the far shore the sloping hills of Arlington National Cemetery with its row on row of simple white markers bearing crosses or Stars of David. They add up to only a tiny fraction of the price that has been paid for our freedom. Each one of those markers is a monument to the kinds of hero I spoke of earlier. Their lives ended in places called Belleau Wood, The Argonne, Omaha Beach, Salerno and halfway around the world on Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Pork Chop Hill, the Chosin Reservoir, and in a hundred rice paddies and jungles of a place called Vietnam. Under one such marker lies a young man – Martin

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<sup>196</sup> *Carter*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1977.

<sup>197</sup> *Reagan*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981.

Treptow – who left his job in a small town barber shop in 1917 to go to France with the famed Rainbow Division. There, on the western front, he was killed trying to carry a message between battalions under heavy artillery fire. We are told that on his body was found a diary. On the flyleaf under the heading, “My Pledge,” he had written these words: “America must win this war. Therefore, I will work, I will save, I will sacrifice, I will endure, I will fight cheerfully and do my utmost, as if the issue of the whole struggle depended on me alone.” The crisis we are facing today does not require of us the kind of sacrifice that Martin Treptow and so many thousands of others were called upon to make. It does require, however, our best effort, and our willingness to believe in ourselves and to believe in our capacity to perform great deeds; to believe that together, with God's help, we can and will resolve the problems which now confront us.<sup>198</sup>

Since he repeatedly drew on the theme of sacrifice and owing to the powerful symbolism of the story about the hitherto obscure World War I veteran Martin Treptow, Reagan's first inaugural address constitutes the second high point (after Roosevelt's inaugurals) concerning the usage of the trope of sacrifice in the inaugural genre. Following Reagan, this theme was taken up by George H. W. Bush, who juxtaposed the materialism of Americans and the emphasis they place on wealth as well as on the attainment of possessions in opposition to “the nobility of work and sacrifice.”<sup>199</sup> In doing so, Bush criticized his compatriots for the fallacy to regard “the sum of our possessions” as “the measure of our lives” and called for a return to traditional American ideals and values, declaring that the “old ideas are new again because they are not old, they are timeless: duty, sacrifice, commitment, and a patriotism that finds its expression in taking part and pitching in.”<sup>200</sup> Four years later, Bill Clinton likewise praised those timeless ideals when he thanked “the millions of men and women whose steadfastness and sacrifice triumphed over Depression, fascism and Communism.”<sup>201</sup> By specifically expressing his gratitude to the masses, Clinton effectively stressed that the act of sacrificing is a collective endeavor and not just an individual effort. In addition, like several of his predecessors, he also emphasized that the United States could only master the challenges of the day, if everybody was prepared and willing to make sacrifices and to contribute one's share, since to put “an end to the era of deadlock

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<sup>198</sup> *Reagan*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981.

<sup>199</sup> G. H. W. *Bush*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1989.

<sup>200</sup> G. H. W. *Bush*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1989.

<sup>201</sup> *Clinton*, First Inaugural Address, January 21, 1993.

and drift [...] [and] [t]o renew America, [...] will not be easy [...] [and] will require sacrifice.”<sup>202</sup>

Unlike previous presidents who had emphasized that the duty to make sacrifices involved every American, George W. Bush confined himself to praising the death on the battlefield as the ultimate sacrifice, when he specifically singled out those who “have shown their devotion to our country in deaths that honored their whole lives” and pledged that their “names and [...] sacrifice”<sup>203</sup> would always be honored by the American nation. The first inaugural address of Barack Obama, on the other hand, despite the fact that he referenced the sacrifice of life in war several times, marked a return to the rhetoric of sacrifice as a collective obligation. For Obama, sacrifices were and are not only made on the battlefield, but can take numerous forms and have to be made by every American. This already becomes apparent in the initial part of his speech, which he devoted to the “sacrifices borne by our ancestors.”<sup>204</sup>

Our journey has never been one of shortcuts or settling for less. It has not been the path for the faint-hearted – for those who prefer leisure over work, or seek only the pleasures of riches and fame. Rather, it has been the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things – some celebrated but more often men and women obscure in their labor, who have carried us up the long, rugged path towards prosperity and freedom. For us, they packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life. For us, they toiled in sweatshops and settled the West; endured the lash of the whip and plowed the hard earth. For us, they fought and died, in places like Concord and Gettysburg; Normandy and Khe Sahn. Time and again these men and women struggled and sacrificed and worked till their hands were raw so that we might live a better life. They saw America as bigger than the sum of our individual ambitions; greater than all the differences of birth or wealth or faction.<sup>205</sup>

After having made the point that, in the past, Americans had made all kinds of sacrifices for the larger cause and greater good of the American nation, Obama, like Ronald Reagan in his first inaugural address, established a connection between past sacrifices and contemporary challenges and necessities. In order to successfully tackle those tasks,

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<sup>202</sup> *Clinton*, First Inaugural Address, January 21, 1993.

<sup>203</sup> *G. W. Bush*, Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 2005.

<sup>204</sup> *Obama*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009.

<sup>205</sup> *Obama*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009.



Obama suggested that his compatriots should emulate the example of American soldiers and adopt their “spirit of service:”<sup>206</sup>

As we consider the road that unfolds before us, we remember with humble gratitude those brave Americans who, at this very hour, patrol far-off deserts and distant mountains. They have something to tell us, just as the fallen heroes who lie in Arlington whisper through the ages. We honor them not only because they are the guardians of our liberty, but because they embody the spirit of service; a willingness to find meaning in something greater than themselves. And yet, at this moment – a moment that will define a generation – it is precisely this spirit that must inhabit us all. For as much as government can do and must do, it is ultimately the faith and determination of the American people upon which this nation relies. It is the kindness to take in a stranger when the levees break, the selflessness of workers who would rather cut their hours than see a friend lose their job which sees us through our darkest hours. It is the firefighter’s courage to storm a stairway filled with smoke, but also a parent’s willingness to nurture a child, that finally decides our fate.<sup>207</sup>

In view of the still simmering wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the grave economic crisis and its associated hardships for Americans, it is hardly surprising that Obama deployed the trope of sacrifice that extensively in his 2009 inaugural speech. In fact, I would even go so far as to designate it the central theme of his first inaugural address, which, in turn, represents the third culmination of the sacrifice theme in the inaugural genre. Conversely, the trope of sacrifice was only of minor importance four years later in Obama’s second inaugural address. In this speech, he only briefly touched on this theme in order to emphasize that the American people, despite the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which did not go quite as initially envisioned, were ready to recur to arms when necessary in order to defend their country, freedom, and ideals. This being said, however, Obama also called on the nation to favor diplomacy and other non-violent strategies over warfare:

Our citizens, seared by the memory of those we have lost, know too well the price that is paid for liberty. The knowledge of their sacrifice will keep us forever vigilant against those who would do us harm. But we are also heirs to those who won the peace and not

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<sup>206</sup> *Obama*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009.

<sup>207</sup> *Obama*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009.

just the war, who turned sworn enemies into the surest of friends, and we must carry those lessons into this time as well.<sup>208</sup>

In summary, it can be concluded that the discussed passages from presidential inaugural addresses show that the theme of sacrifice is closely linked to American ideals such as freedom and democracy. In order to protect and preserve these principles and ideals, individual sacrifices have been deemed necessary and expected from every American. In addition, presidents have also called for sacrifices in order to successfully cope with current challenges and problems of all kinds. What they have in common is that whenever a president demands sacrifices for the sake of the greater collective good, it is presented as an indispensable duty of Americans, prescribed by the national ideology. As such the theme of sacrifice constitutes a vital part of the civil religion.

### **3.9. Biblical quotations and prayers in inaugural addresses**

An aspect that has so far been neglected is the tendency of presidents to quote and allude to biblical passages in their inaugural addresses. This practice is yet another fruit of the religious dimension known as the American civil religion.<sup>209</sup> The first president that included a biblical citation in his inaugural address was John Quincy Adams, who quoted from the Psalms, “except the Lord keep the city the watchman waketh but in vain,”<sup>210</sup> during his inaugural in 1825. Interestingly, however, the nine inaugural addresses given after John Quincy Adams’ four-year tenure as President of the United States, like the nine delivered before, did not feature a single Bible quote. This changed on March 4, 1865, when reelected President Abraham Lincoln not only reintroduced the Bible into the inaugural genre but drew heavily on biblical citations in his second inaugural, which contained three direct quotes from the Bible as well as three biblical references. According to Ronald C. White, Jr., this accumulation of biblical quotations,

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<sup>208</sup> *Obama*, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 2013.

<sup>209</sup> see *Bellah*, *Civil Religion in America*, 4.

<sup>210</sup> Psalm 127:1 (King James Version), quoted in: *J. Q. Adams*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1825.

“signals Lincoln’s determination to think theologically as well as politically”<sup>211</sup> about the institution of slavery and the Civil War.

In his first of four biblical citations, Lincoln discussed the topic of slavery by alluding to Genesis 3:19 (King James Version), deeming the Southerners’ plea to God to support them in “wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces” as “strange.”<sup>212</sup> He then went on to cite the Gospel of Matthew 7:1, “let us judge not, that we be not judged,”<sup>213</sup> to urge the Unionists in the audience to resist the temptation to make judgments about members and supporters of the Confederacy, implying that the northern states were not in a position to do so, since they shared the guilt of slavery with the South. After pointing out that, while both parties were convinced that they had one and the same God on their side, the prayer of neither party had been fully answered, since “[t]he Almighty has His own purposes,”<sup>214</sup> Lincoln cautioned the northern states to refrain from recriminations and revengeful retaliation against the South by quoting from the New Testament again: “Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.”<sup>215</sup> Furthermore, Lincoln expressed the nation’s trust in God’s wisdom and guidance by stating that “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”<sup>216</sup> Based on the fact that he, as President, placed his trust in God’s judgment, Lincoln proclaimed that if the Almighty deemed it necessary, America would ride out the continuation of the war until the prosperity resulting from 250 years of slavery had disappeared and “until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword.”<sup>217</sup> Finally, the last paragraph of Lincoln’s speech featured two additional biblical references. While “let us strive on to [...] bind up the nation’s wounds” is based on Psalm 147:3, “to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan”<sup>218</sup> alludes to James 1:27.

Following Lincoln, only two other presidents quoted religious texts in their inaugural addresses during the remainder of the nineteenth century. Only one of them –

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<sup>211</sup> White, *The Second Inaugural Address*, 242.

<sup>212</sup> Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1865.

<sup>213</sup> Matthew 7:1 (KJV), quoted in: Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1865.

<sup>214</sup> Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1865.

<sup>215</sup> Matthew 18:7 (KJV), quoted in: Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1865.

<sup>216</sup> Psalm 19:9 (KJV), quoted in: Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1865.

<sup>217</sup> Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1865.

<sup>218</sup> Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1865.

James A. Garfield<sup>219</sup> – referenced the Bible, while the other one – Garfield’s predecessor Rutherford B. Hayes – quoted a prayer from the Anglican Church’s *Book of Common Prayer* (*A prayer for the High Court of Parliament, to be read during their sessions*), which became known in the United States by the title *A prayer for the Congress of the United States*.

As it has been the case with some of the afore-discussed religious myths, biblical quotations also became considerably more common in inaugural addresses after the turn to the twentieth century. In 1901, William McKinley invoked Romans 5:5 “Hope maketh not ashamed,”<sup>220</sup> and two decades later, Warren G. Harding concluded his inaugural address with the biblical question “What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”<sup>221</sup> Following four decades during which presidents refrained from citing the Bible, John F. Kennedy incorporated two biblical quotations in his 1961 inaugural address. First, he described his hopes concerning the future relationship with the Soviet Union through Isaiah 58:6, when he proclaimed a new era in which 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.’”<sup>222</sup> Later, Kennedy summoned his American compatriots to action with his call “to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle [...] against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself.”<sup>223</sup> In this call, he inserted the words of a verse from St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: “rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation.”<sup>224</sup> In 1965, Lyndon B. Johnson capped off the conclusion of his inaugural speech with the words “of an ancient leader,”<sup>225</sup> taken from Solomon’s Prayer for Wisdom: “Give me now wisdom and knowledge, that I may go out and come in before this people: for who can judge this thy people, that is so great?”<sup>226</sup> As Austermühl has pointed out, “Johnson’s prayer quote and the public display of humility it expresses – his inauguration takes place little over a year after Kennedy’s assassination – references the same pre-text as Truman did when – only four days after the death of Franklin D.

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<sup>219</sup> Garfield quoted Isaiah 58:6 (KJV) in his 1881 inaugural address.

<sup>220</sup> Romans 5:5 (KJV), quoted in: *McKinley*, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1901.

<sup>221</sup> Micah 6:8 (KJV), quoted in: *Harding*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1921.

<sup>222</sup> Isaiah 58:6 (KJV), quoted in: *Kennedy*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.

<sup>223</sup> *Kennedy*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.

<sup>224</sup> Romans 12:12 (KJV), quoted in: *Kennedy*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.

<sup>225</sup> *Johnson*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1965.

<sup>226</sup> 2 Chronicles 1:10 (KJV), quoted in: *Johnson*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1965.

Roosevelt – he first addressed the United States Congress as President on April 16, 1945.”<sup>227</sup>

Since the two presidents following Johnson, Richard Nixon<sup>228</sup> and Jimmy Carter,<sup>229</sup> also drew on biblical quotations, the time period between Kennedy’s and Carter’s inauguration marked the second climax in inaugural history – after Lincoln’s second inaugural address – concerning the usage of Bible quotes. During these 25 years, only President Nixon refrained from using biblical references in his second inaugural speech and thus provided the only example from that time in which the nation’s highest political leader neither quoted nor alluded to a biblical passage. However, after Carter’s tenure in the Oval Office had come to a close, the next Bible quote did not appear in an inaugural address until 1993. Then, President-elect Bill Clinton, who, interestingly, preferred the word “scripture”<sup>230</sup> over the more common term “Bible,” brought about another return of the Holy Writ to the inaugural genre, when he quoted Galatians 6:9 towards the end of his speech: “And let us not be weary in well-doing, for in due season, we shall reap, if we faint not.”<sup>231</sup> Barack Obama, who, like Clinton, used the term “scripture” instead of Bible in his inaugural, referenced 1 Corinthians 13:11, when he announced that “the time has come to set aside childish things.”<sup>232</sup>

Apart from the custom of presidents to quote and allude to biblical passages or prayers, two presidents injected a religious note into their inaugural addresses by formulating their own prayers and inserting them into their speeches. In 1953, Dwight D. Eisenhower, contrary to the common practice to end the inaugural speech with an appeal to God, referenced God by beginning his first inaugural speech with the following prayer of his own composition:

Almighty God, as we stand here at this moment my future associates in the executive branch of government join me in beseeching that Thou will make full and complete our dedication to the service of the people in this throng, and their fellow citizens everywhere. Give us, we pray, the power to discern clearly right from wrong, and allow all our words and actions to be governed thereby, and by the laws of this land.

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<sup>227</sup> *Austermühl*, *The Great American Scaffold*, 223.

<sup>228</sup> Nixon quoted Malachi 4:2 in his first inaugural address in 1969.

<sup>229</sup> Carter quoted Micah 6:8 (KJV) in his 1977 inaugural address.

<sup>230</sup> *Clinton*, *First Inaugural Address*, January 21, 1993.

<sup>231</sup> Galatians 6:9 (KJV), quoted in: *Clinton*, *First Inaugural Address*, January 21, 1993.

<sup>232</sup> *Obama*, *First Inaugural Address*, January 20, 2009.

Especially we pray that our concern shall be for all the people regardless of station, race, or calling. May cooperation be permitted and be the mutual aim of those who, under the concepts of our Constitution, hold to differing political faiths; so that all may work for the good of our beloved country and Thy glory. Amen.<sup>233</sup>

Almost four decades later, George H. W. Bush followed Eisenhower's example, when, after a few introductory remarks, he asked his audience to bow their heads for his "first act as President" – the rendition of a self-composed prayer, which made up the fifth paragraph of his inaugural address and read as follows:

Heavenly Father, we bow our heads and thank You for Your love. Accept our thanks for the peace that yields this day and the shared faith that makes its continuance likely. Make us strong to do Your work, willing to heed and hear Your will, and write on our hearts these words: "Use power to help people." For we are given power not to advance our own purposes, nor to make a great show in the world, nor a name. There is but one just use of power, and it is to serve people. Help us to remember it, Lord. Amen.<sup>234</sup>

As David Domke and Kevin Coe have pointed out, the prayers of both Bush and Eisenhower "expressed a desire to serve God and people."<sup>235</sup> However, the two presidents differed in the way in which they conveyed this desire:

Eisenhower invoked God three times and prioritized the American public and nation [...]. In contrast, Bush invoked God six times, prioritized God and divine will, and spoke in [a] far more intimate manner [...], using such words as Father, love, Hearts, You and Your, and Lord. [...] His words [...] recalled an era of religious understanding that pre-dates the scientific rationalism derided by many conservative Christians. As one observer put it: "[Bush's] text was pre-Enlightenment, words that could have been spoken with equal impact in the 17<sup>th</sup> century about the restorative powers of faith and prayer and good deeds and the balm of living in a community."<sup>236</sup>

This theme ran like a golden thread through the entire weekend of George H. W. Bush's inaugural festivities, which were rounded off with a nationally televised prayer service at Washington National Cathedral, attended by both the President's and Vice President's families.<sup>237</sup> Hence, Bush's inauguration and its associated celebrations and

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<sup>233</sup> *Eisenhower*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1953.

<sup>234</sup> G. H. W. *Bush*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1989.

<sup>235</sup> *Domke & Coe*, *The God Strategy*, 36.

<sup>236</sup> *Domke & Coe*, *The God Strategy*, 36.

<sup>237</sup> see *Kane, Anzovin, Podell*, *Facts about the Presidents*, 533.

events stood exemplary for his politics, which “were exactly the type desired by the many Americans interested in a president who is not only a political leader but a spiritual one as well.”<sup>238</sup>

### 3.10. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that due to the religious dimension of the American creed and the civil religious myths, which have their origin in the religious topoi and symbolism of the Puritan vision, U.S. politics is substantially shaped by a unique entanglement between the political and religious sphere. Consequently, religious themes are frequently articulated in speeches by politicians, for whom it is perfectly acceptable to present aspects of any kind in terms of religious narratives, symbols, and rhetoric. This again evokes civil religious interpretations on the part of the audience, based on the civil religion that all Americans share with each other. Owing to their epideictic and ceremonial character, inaugural addresses feature an even higher density of civil religious tropes and myths than other kinds of political oratory. As “mythic discourses”<sup>239</sup> and “public meditations on national values and identity,”<sup>240</sup> their content transcends everyday political issues and partisanship. Embedded in and thus significantly influenced by the ritualistic and ceremonial context of the presidential inauguration, inaugural addresses promote shared values, “rehearse[e] the past, [...], and articulat[e] timely and timeless principles.”<sup>241</sup> In doing so, inaugurals have always drawn on the Puritan-inspired rhetoric of consensus with its religious myths and imagery. However, as I have shown through my analysis, most religious tropes appear more frequently in this type of political speech in the twentieth (and twenty-first) than in the nineteenth century. Some of them did not even enter the inaugural genre until after the end of the nineteenth century. It stands to reason that this increase in religiously charged rhetoric is related to the advent of the so-called “rhetorical presidency.” This term was coined by James W. Ceaser, Glen E. Thurow, Jeffrey Tulis,

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<sup>238</sup> *Domke & Coe*, *The God Strategy*, 37.

<sup>239</sup> *Beasley*, *The Rhetoric of Ideological Consensus in the United States*, 175.

<sup>240</sup> *Campbell & Jamieson*, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 334.

<sup>241</sup> *Campbell & Jamieson*, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 46.

and Joseph M. Bessette<sup>242</sup> and refers to the “increase of direct ‘rhetorical’ appeals to the people”<sup>243</sup> by twentieth and twenty-first century presidents. According to Ceaser and his colleagues, inaugural addresses in the nineteenth century had been designed to remind the public of the United States’ republican philosophy and to “instruct the people in and fortify their attachment to true republican political principles.”<sup>244</sup> In addition, nineteenth-century presidents had “consistently attempted to show how the actions of the new administration would conform to constitutional and republican principles.”<sup>245</sup> Beginning with “the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson,” however, “popular or mass historic [became] the principal tool of presidential governance.”<sup>246</sup> To quote Ceaser and his colleagues:

Instead of showing how the policies of the incoming administration reflected the principles of our form of government, [especially] Wilson sought to articulate the unspoken desires of the people by holding out a vision of their fulfillment. Presidential speech in Wilson’s view should articulate what is “in our hearts” and not necessarily what is in our constitution.<sup>247</sup>

It would be a logical conclusion to assume that presidents, in order to attain this goal and to meet the requirements of the “rhetorical presidency,” laid out by Wilson, drew on religious myths and imagery in their respective inaugural address(es). Whether there is an actual connection between the advent of the “rhetorical presidency” at the beginning of the twentieth century and the simultaneously occurring increase of religious tropes in the inaugural genre, would be a potential question for future research to consider and examine.

As the preceding analysis has shown, the main functions which religious themes and references fulfill in inaugural addresses are to promote unity and to generate and reinforce collective identity. Since the religious dimension of the American creed is fused with and thus closely linked to a set of universal, secular principles, adhered to by Americans, religious rhetoric is also employed to establish a connection between the respective inaugural address and the national ideology. Other motives and intents

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<sup>242</sup> see Ceaser et. al., *The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency*, 233-251.

<sup>243</sup> *Germino*, *The Inaugural Addresses of American Presidents*, 35.

<sup>244</sup> Ceaser et. al., *The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency*, 237.

<sup>245</sup> Ceaser et. al., *The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency*, 238.

<sup>246</sup> *Tulis*, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 4.

<sup>247</sup> Ceaser et. al., *The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency*, 239.



behind the usage of religious symbolism are to affirm fidelity to the civil religion and to highlight America's uniqueness and exceptional character. Especially the latter is used to strengthen the country's self-esteem during national crises and "to mobilize support for the attainment of national goals."<sup>248</sup>

Furthermore, several presidents have attempted to shape and alter American self-perceptions by means of religious myths and imagery, when they, for instance, have drawn on the "city upon a hill" myth in order to position their country either as a political or moral role model for the world, or both. Likewise, some presidents have interpreted God's destiny for the United States as an order to lead the world, while others have emphasized that it was God's purpose for America to merely serve as a shining example for the rest of the world to follow, depending on whether the respective president was a proponent of the policy of internationalism or of the policy of isolationism. In addition to their attempts to shape the ways in which their fellow countrymen view themselves, some presidents have also tried to influence the ways in which the United States is regarded by the rest of the world, for instance when they have used inaugurals to spread and export the image of the United States as a benevolent nation that always pursues altruistic and well-meaning purposes and aims to act as a Good Samaritan on a global scale.

While religious themes have hardly been employed in inaugural addresses to elicit congressional action, presidents have used them in order to call for necessary sacrifices or to prepare the people for potential sacrifices for the larger cause and greater collective good. Furthermore, the nation's highest political leaders have drawn on religious tropes and references to articulate the principles and views that would govern their terms in office and to exemplify their respective political philosophy.

What should not be forgotten in this discussion is the fact that by suggesting that the inauguration takes place in the presence of God, presidents have taken their oaths of office not only before the people but also before God. As a consequence, the presidents' obligations extend beyond the Constitution not only to their compatriots but also to God. As Robert N. Bellah has pointed out, this has important implications for the interpretation of past and future presidential decisions:

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<sup>248</sup> Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, 13.

In American political theory, sovereignty rests, of course, with the people, but implicitly, and often explicitly, the ultimate sovereignty has been attributed to God. [...] Though the will of the people as expressed in the majority vote is carefully institutionalized as the operative source of political authority, it is deprived of an ultimate significance. The will of the people is not itself the criterion of right and wrong. There is a higher criterion in terms of which this will can be judged; it is possible that the people may be wrong. The president's obligation extends to the higher criterion.<sup>249</sup>

However, religious imagery has not only served to justify past or future decisions by the respective president. It has also fulfilled a similar role when it came to legitimating war campaigns as well as to discrediting the enemy and winning public support. Similarly, foreign policy undertakings and interventions have been portrayed as benevolent – and sometimes even – holy missions that are part of a divine plan which is implemented by the United States.

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<sup>249</sup> Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, 4.

## 4. The secular dimension of the American creed in the inaugural addresses of American presidents

### 4.1. Introduction

As Sidney A. Pearson, Jr. observes, the American creed “has been open to both a secular and a religious interpretation.”<sup>1</sup> After having discussed the religious dimension of the national ideology and its application in inaugural addresses, it is now time to shift the focus to the secular components of the American creed. American ideals are the result of the “profound influence” which “liberal Protestantism and political liberalism, democratic religion and democratic politics, American faith and Christian faith [...] exerted [...] upon each other.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, religion in the United States “helped to make the creed and was compatible with it.”<sup>3</sup> Puritan Protestantism and Enlightenment thought encompassed similar beliefs and ideas, which fused with each other to form the American creed.<sup>4</sup> The resulting “ideological consensus”<sup>5</sup> implicates that Americans are “more ideological and more ideologically united than their counterparts elsewhere.”<sup>6</sup>

However, similar to the myriad of names that American presidents have used to address God in their inaugural speeches, there has also been little consent among them when it came to the question of how to refer to the American creed in their inaugurals. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, called it a “political faith” and “benign religion”<sup>7</sup> that enlightens the American people, while John Quincy Adams described it as “our political creed.”<sup>8</sup> Grover Cleveland, on the other hand, portrayed it as “the spirit of true Americanism,”<sup>9</sup> and James Knox Polk, in turn, referred to it as the “practice of just and liberal principles,” which has produced a “political family” with “a common destiny.”<sup>10</sup> Later, United States presidents of the twentieth and twenty-first century frequently referred to the American creed as a type of “faith” or “spirit”:

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<sup>1</sup> *Pearson*, Introduction, xiii.

<sup>2</sup> *Miller*, Religion and Political Attitudes, 98f.

<sup>3</sup> *Miller*, Religion and Political Attitudes, 98.

<sup>4</sup> see *Huntington*, *Who Are We?*, 69.

<sup>5</sup> *Bercovitch*, *The Rites of Assent*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Beasley*, *The Rhetoric of Ideological Consensus in the United States*, 170.

<sup>7</sup> *Jefferson*, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801.

<sup>8</sup> *J. Q. Adams*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1825.

<sup>9</sup> *Cleveland*, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1893.

<sup>10</sup> *Polk*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1845.

The faith of the fathers was a mighty force in [the] creation [of the American Republic], and the faith of their descendants has wrought its progress and furnished its defenders.<sup>11</sup>

The American people stand firm in the faith which has inspired this Nation from the beginning.<sup>12</sup>

This faith is the abiding creed of our fathers. It is our faith in the deathless dignity of man, governed by eternal moral and natural laws.<sup>13</sup>

Our destiny in the midst of change will rest on the unchanged character of our people, and on their faith.<sup>14</sup>

We have endured a long night of the American spirit.<sup>15</sup>

We must act [...] to advance the timeless spirit once conferred to us in a spare Philadelphia hall.<sup>16</sup>

The arguably best description of the American creed springing from the lips of a president likewise involved the terms “faith” and “spirit”:

And a nation, like a person, has something deeper, something more permanent, something larger than the sum of all its parts. It is that something which matters most to its future – which calls forth the most sacred guarding of its present. It is a thing for which we find it difficult – even impossible – to hit upon a single, simple word. And yet we all understand what it is – the spirit – the faith of America. It is the product of centuries. It was born in the multitudes of those who came from many lands [...].<sup>17</sup>

Apart from this common tendency to describe the American creed as a “faith” or “spirit,” however, presidents after the turn to the twentieth century have made use of a contingent of other names to refer to the national ideology. Among these other designations and descriptions for the American creed by twentieth and twenty-first century presidents have been “a lofty ideal,”<sup>18</sup> “[...] what it is we insist upon and cannot

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<sup>11</sup> *McKinley*, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1901.

<sup>12</sup> *Truman*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1949.

<sup>13</sup> *Eisenhower*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1953.

<sup>14</sup> *Johnson*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1965.

<sup>15</sup> *Nixon*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1969.

<sup>16</sup> *Obama*, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> *F. Roosevelt*, Third Inaugural Address, January 20, 1941.

<sup>18</sup> *T. Roosevelt*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1905.

forget,”<sup>19</sup> “our foundations of political and social belief,”<sup>20</sup> “the American covenant,”<sup>21</sup> “the very idea of America,”<sup>22</sup> and “our common creed.”<sup>23</sup>

Following this brief introduction into the secular dimension of the American creed, the focal point of discussion in the subsequent chapters will be the values which are encapsulated in America’s national ideology. After a short ontological examination of these shared ideals, the aim of the following sections will be to uncover and analyze common practices and conventions in the ways presidents have presented these principles in their inaugural addresses.

## **4.2. American values, liberalism, and Puritanism**

America is a place, a country, a people, but also an idea. It is the idea of a nation founded on a set of universal values – self-evident truths – that come not from blood, or soil, or skin color, or wealth – but from the fact of our common humanity. It is the idea of a nation bound together not by territory or religion or ethnicity but by a self-conscious commitment to shared values, for ourselves and for all peoples.<sup>24</sup>

As Anne-Marie Slaughter has so aptly pointed out, the American creed does not consist of distinctly American ideals but universal ones. These values are part of America’s Enlightenment heritage and, consequently, do not only apply to U.S. citizens, but to all people in the world who identify themselves with Western thought and values. Nevertheless, these principles and values are referred to as American ideals, since they are adhered to by citizens and people living in the United States where this body of ideals is more valued, cherished, and appreciated than anywhere else.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Americans “have forged a common American identity”<sup>26</sup> by committing to these ideals, which consequently unite the American people and knit the nation together.

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<sup>19</sup> *Wilson*, Second Inaugural Address, March 5, 1917.

<sup>20</sup> *Harding*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1921.

<sup>21</sup> *Johnson*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1965.

<sup>22</sup> *Clinton*, First Inaugural Address, January 21, 1993.

<sup>23</sup> *Obama*, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> *Slaughter*, *The Idea that is America*, 1f.

<sup>25</sup> see *Myrdal*, *An American Dilemma*, 3, 25.

<sup>26</sup> *Slaughter*, *The Idea that is America*, 5.

However, scholars are not entirely in agreement as to what these core values which underpin the American ideological foundation in fact are. Gunnar Myrdal identified the ideals of liberty, equality, individualism, and justice as the main constituents of the American creed, while Martin Seymour Lipset listed liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire as its key values. What both have in common is that they concur with Louis Hartz, who has identified Americans' allegiance to John Locke's concept of liberalism as the underlying root of U.S. ideology and its values.<sup>27</sup> According to Vanessa B. Beasley, Hartz' diagnosis has been echoed by a plethora of scholars and continues to loom large over debates and studies about American nationalism and identity, because his notion of Lockean liberalism is perfectly compatible with America's civil religion.<sup>28</sup> Along the same lines, James A. Morone has argued that the link between John Locke's "liberal idea" and the Puritan mission had a profound impact on the American creed and the development of the nation:

The mission, in Winthrop's sense, meant constructing a society so well ordered that the world [...] would find it an irresistible model. As modern American liberalism inherited the mission, it offered the world a model of economic opportunity and a distinctive political creed: equality, liberty, rights, and consent of the governed. Sure there has been xenophobia, nativism, racism; but across American time, these are all matched and trumped by the principles embedded in the American creed. From this perspective, American political history reads like the inexorable (although bumpy) march of liberal democracy. Americans secured basic political rights with their Constitution; political rights expanded in the Jacksonian period (to the "common man"), after the civil war (to the "freemen"), during the progressive years (to women), during the 1960s (based on race and gender, again). Throughout, immigrants were assimilated and marginal groups empowered.<sup>29</sup>

Due to their unifying power and the fact that committing to them is one of the core features that make Americans American, the values and ideals encapsulated in this "distinctive political creed" are an integral part of every presidential inaugural address. However, as I have found through my study, American presidents, despite their

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<sup>27</sup> see *Hartz, The Liberal Tradition in America*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> see *Beasley, You, the People*, 33.

<sup>29</sup> *Morone, The Struggle for American Culture*, 246.

intentions to give their inaugural addresses a personal touch, do not discuss these values and principles in completely arbitrary ways, but, instead, follow certain patterns and conventions. Consequently, I have been able to identify several common tendencies and practices that American presidents share with each other when it comes to exploring these values in their inaugural speeches. These commonalities will be the main subject of investigation of the remaining chapters.

### **4.3. The sanctity and inviolability of American ideals**

One common custom of presidents is to either overtly point to or, more subtly, imply the central importance and sanctity of these shared national values. Even somebody who has never heard of the American creed before would have a pretty good understanding of the high regard in which Americans hold the principles comprised in their national ideology after reading or listening to a couple of inaugural addresses. This conviction that these principles are of utmost importance to the American experiment was already held by the Founding Father generation. According to Thomas Jefferson they “form the bright constellation which has gone before us and guided our steps through an age of revolution and reformation. The wisdom of our sages and blood of our heroes have been devoted to their attainment.”<sup>30</sup> Due to the high esteem in which these ideals are held in the United States, it is hardly surprising that Americans have been more willing to defend them on the battlefield than to go to war for material interests or interests of power. Thus, their country’s leaders instead of justifying the country’s wars with territorial ambitions or economic and political interests, rather presented warfare as a necessary obligation in the name of these values and principles, which Americans had to defend and stand up for. This was the case, in the War of 1812, which James Madison portrayed as an “open and honorable war for the maintenance of [the United States’] rights and safety.”<sup>31</sup> Madison was also quick to point out that the country’s ideals were not abandoned in times of war, since “no principle of justice or honor, no usage of civilized nations, no precept of courtesy or humanity, have been infringed” by

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<sup>30</sup> *Jefferson*, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801.

<sup>31</sup> *Madison*, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1813.

Americans, who fought the War of 1812 “in a spirit of liberality which was never surpassed.”<sup>32</sup>

Since these ideals had guided the young nation through the War of 1812, Martin Van Buren concluded in his 1837 inaugural speech “that an implicit and undeviating adherence to the principles on which we set out can carry us prosperously onward through all the conflicts of circumstances and vicissitudes inseparable from the lapse of years.”<sup>33</sup> The knowledge to have successfully handled all major challenges and crises so far gave the young United States a feeling of self-determination and optimism for the future, as Van Buren’s inaugural address further illustrates:

It impresses on my mind a firm belief that the perpetuity of our institutions depends upon ourselves; that if we maintain the principles on which they were established they are destined to confer their benefits on countless generations yet to come.<sup>34</sup>

Van Buren was also convinced that based on these principles and values, the United States “will present to every friend of mankind the cheering proof that a popular government, wisely formed, is wanting in no element of endurance or strength.”<sup>35</sup> Sixteen years later, this sentiment was also echoed by Franklin Pierce, when he looked back at the initial years of the United States in his inaugural address: “Inconsiderable in population and apparent resources, [the new-born nation] was upheld by a broad and intelligent comprehension of rights and an all-pervading purpose to maintain them, stronger than armaments.”<sup>36</sup>

Even when the Union’s victory in the Civil War had averted the danger of disunion and wiped out the institution of slavery, which meant that the nation could “employ its best energies in developing the great possibilities of the future,”<sup>37</sup> the chief political actors of an expansionist and future-oriented United States nevertheless emphasized the importance of the country staying true to its old heritage embodied by America’s venerable ideals. Although the everyday lives of Americans as well as the global position of their country had fundamentally changed in the meantime, the

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<sup>32</sup> *Madison*, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1813.

<sup>33</sup> *Van Buren*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1837.

<sup>34</sup> *Van Buren*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1837.

<sup>35</sup> *Van Buren*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1837.

<sup>36</sup> *Pierce*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1853.

<sup>37</sup> *Garfield*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1881.



thematic continuity in inaugural addresses regarding the American creed and its principles remained unchanged. Thus, William McKinley in 1897 followed the example of his eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century predecessors, when he proclaimed that the “great essential to our happiness and prosperity is that we adhere to the principles upon which the Government was established and insist upon their faithful observance.”<sup>38</sup>

Unlike McKinley, who had implied that those principles guarantee the wealth and happy state of the American people, the rights established in the Bill of Rights were at the center of Woodrow Wilson’s remarks about American ideals and duties in his first inaugural speech in 1913: “These are some of the things we ought to do, and not leave the others undone, the old-fashioned, never-to-be-neglected, fundamental safeguarding of property and of individual right.”<sup>39</sup> Four years later, Wilson, foreshadowing the United States’ entry into World War I, pointed, like Madison, to America’s honorable ways of conducting warfare, when he underscored that the United States would observe their principles in case they “be drawn on [...] to a more active assertion of our rights as we see them and a more immediate association with the great struggle itself.”<sup>40</sup>

But nothing will alter our thought or our purpose. They are too clear to be obscured. They are too deeply rooted in the principles of our national life to be altered. We desire neither conquest nor advantage. We wish nothing that can be had only at the cost of another people. We always professed unselfish purpose and we covet the opportunity to prove our professions are sincere.<sup>41</sup>

After the end of World War I, Warren G. Harding, in his inaugural, justified his country’s unwillingness to join the League of Nations with America’s deeply held ideals incompatible with such a commitment. He explained that the stance of the United States “is not selfishness, it is sanctity. It is not aloofness, it is security. It is not suspicion of others, it is patriotic adherence to the things which made us what we are.”<sup>42</sup> In how far these ideals and values are central to America’s self-conception is illustrated by the inaugural address of Calvin Coolidge:

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<sup>38</sup> *McKinley*, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1897.

<sup>39</sup> *Wilson*, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1913.

<sup>40</sup> *Wilson*, Second Inaugural Address, March 5, 1917.

<sup>41</sup> *Wilson*, Second Inaugural Address, March 5, 1917.

<sup>42</sup> *Harding*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1921.

Throughout all these experiences we have enlarged our freedom, we have strengthened our independence. We have been, and propose to be, more and more American. We believe that we can best serve our own country and most successfully discharge our obligations to humanity by continuing to be openly and candidly, intensely and scrupulously, American. If we have any heritage, it has been that. If we have any destiny, we have found it in that direction.<sup>43</sup>

Owing to the eminence and importance of these values and principles, presidents have called for a return to these ideals, whenever they felt that their country had strayed from the right path. In 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt, announced in his first inaugural address, delivered in the midst of the Great Depression, that “[t]he money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization,” before he called on his American compatriots, “We may now restore that temple to the ancient truths.”<sup>44</sup> In a similar vein, Jimmy Carter urged Americans to renew their dedication and allegiance to the country’s traditional values after the Vietnam War had inflicted painful wounds on the American society: “Let our recent mistakes bring a resurgent commitment to the basic principles of our Nation [...]”<sup>45</sup> Interestingly enough, twelve years before Carter’s inauguration, Lyndon B. Johnson had stood in the same place and had drawn on the same American ideals in order to justify his country’s interventionist policy in Indochina:

Change has brought new meaning to that old mission. We can never again stand aside, prideful in isolation. Terrific dangers and troubles that we once called “foreign” now constantly live among us. If American lives must end, and American treasure be spilled, in countries we barely know, that is the price that change has demanded of conviction and of our enduring covenant. [...] If we succeed, it will not be because of what we have, but it will be because of what we are; not because of what we own, but, rather because of what we believe. For we are a nation of believers. Underneath the clamor of building and the rush of our day's pursuits, we are believers in justice and liberty and union, and in our own Union. We believe that every man must someday be free. And we believe in ourselves.<sup>46</sup>

Apart from their dissenting opinions regarding the Vietnam War, however, Johnson and Carter shared some commonalities with each other based on another aspect concerning

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<sup>43</sup> *Coolidge*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1925.

<sup>44</sup> *F. Roosevelt*, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933.

<sup>45</sup> *Carter*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1977.

<sup>46</sup> *Johnson*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1965.

American values and principles. When Johnson said that “[c]hange has brought new meaning to that old mission,” he voiced the same belief that traditional American ideals had to be brought into accordance with contemporary needs and challenges, as when Carter quoted his high school teacher who used to say, “We must adjust to changing times and still hold to unchanging principles.”<sup>47</sup> Likewise, Barack Obama also sounded this theme in 2009 while simultaneously calling for a return to these ideals after what he deemed a “false [...] choice between our safety and our ideals,”<sup>48</sup> which had resulted in a weakening of civil liberties during the tenure of his predecessor George W. Bush:

Our Founding Fathers, faced with perils that we can scarcely imagine, drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man, a charter expanded by the blood of generations. We are the keepers of this legacy. Guided by these principles once more, we can meet those new threats [...]. [...] Our challenges may be new. The instruments with which we meet them may be new. But those values upon which our success depends [...] are old. [...] They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history. What is demanded then is a return to these truths.<sup>49</sup>

Four years later, Obama again took up this theme in his second inaugural address after quoting a passage from the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence: “Today we continue a never-ending journey to bridge the meaning of those words with the realities of our time.”<sup>50</sup> In order to achieve this lofty goal, change was inevitable, as Bill Clinton had already pointed out in his first inaugural address in 1993:

When our founders boldly declared America's independence to the world and our purposes to the Almighty, they knew that America, to endure, would have to change. Not change for change's sake, but change to preserve America's ideals – life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness. Though we march to the music of our time, our mission is timeless.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Carter*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1977.

<sup>48</sup> *Obama*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009.

<sup>49</sup> *Obama*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009.

<sup>50</sup> *Obama*, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 2013.

<sup>51</sup> *Clinton*, First Inaugural Address, January 21, 1993.

#### 4.4. The universalist dimension of American values

A second common feature in the genre of inaugural addresses is the presidents' shared conviction of the universalism of American principles and political core beliefs. In other words, presidents expressed in their inaugurals that American ideals are, in fact, universal humane ideals. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the nation's highest political leaders proclaimed at their inaugurations that those values and ideals are destined to spread, at first, over the entire North American continent and, finally, throughout the whole world. In the nineteenth century, these universalist assumptions became evident, whenever presidents discussed the treatment of and political dealings with Native Americans:

They have claims on the magnanimity and, I may add, on the justice of this nation which we must all feel. We should become their real benefactors; we should perform the office of their Great Father, the endearing title which they emphatically give to the Chief Magistrate of our Union. Their sovereignty over vast territories should cease, in lieu of which the right of soil should be secured to each individual and his posterity in competent portions; and for the territory thus ceded by each tribe some reasonable equivalent should be granted, to be vested in permanent funds for the support of civil government over them and for the education of their children, for their instruction in the arts of husbandry, and to provide sustenance for them until they could provide it for themselves.<sup>52</sup>

[P]rogress has been made [...] in alluring the aboriginal hunters of our land to the cultivation of the soil and of the mind[.]<sup>53</sup>

The proper treatment of the original occupants of this land – the Indians – is one deserving of careful study. I will favor any course toward them which tends to their civilization and ultimate citizenship.<sup>54</sup>

My efforts in the future will be directed [...] to bring the aborigines of the country under the benign influences of education and civilization. It is either this or war of extermination.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Monroe*, Second Inaugural Address, March 5, 1821.

<sup>53</sup> *J. Q. Adams*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1825.

<sup>54</sup> *Grant*, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1869.

<sup>55</sup> *Grant*, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1873.

The conscience of the people demands that the Indians within our boundaries shall be fairly and honestly treated as wards of the Government and their education and civilization promoted with a view to their ultimate citizenship.<sup>56</sup>

Every effort should be made to lead them, through the paths of civilization and education, to self-supporting and independent citizenship.<sup>57</sup>

It is evident that nineteenth-century presidents definitely saw the potential to “civilize” Native Americans and integrate them into American society as well as to turn them into productive members of the nation. However, in order to suit the action to the word, presidents deemed it necessary that America’s indigenous population would forsake its cultural heritage, tribal identities, and general way of life, and replace it with the dominant culture, moral concepts, and values of the young nation. This feeling of cultural and ideological superiority went hand in hand with the Manifest Destiny notion, which entailed that the extension of U.S. dominion also involved the spread of American principles and ideals, as exemplified by the quotes from Martin Van Buren, Zachary Taylor, and William McKinley:

From a small community we have risen to a people powerful in numbers and in strength; but with our increase has gone hand in hand the progress of just principles.<sup>58</sup>

As American freemen we cannot but sympathize in all efforts to extend the blessings of civil and political liberty[.]<sup>59</sup>

These years of glorious history have exalted mankind and advanced the cause of freedom throughout the world, and immeasurably strengthened the precious free institutions which we enjoy.<sup>60</sup>

While for the majority of the nineteenth century, remarks by presidents, reflecting their conviction of the universalism of American principles, predominantly concerned the American continent itself (the nation’s dealings with Native Americans as well as its internal conquest and taming of the land), this changed towards the end of the century and, finally, in the twentieth century. The advent of Neo-Imperialism during the later stages of the nineteenth century as well as the United States’ reorientation toward an

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<sup>56</sup> *Cleveland*, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1885.

<sup>57</sup> *Cleveland*, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1893.

<sup>58</sup> *Van Buren*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1837.

<sup>59</sup> *Taylor*, Inaugural Address, March 5, 1849.

<sup>60</sup> *McKinley*, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1897.

active global force that permanently abandoned its policy of isolationism in favor of its international interests and aspirations after World War II resulted in what I refer to as an “internationalization” of American values and principles. This means that twentieth-century presidents not only expressed their conviction even more frequently and emphatically than their nineteenth-century counterparts that America’s ideals apply to all the people in the world. What is more, American presidents after 1900 increasingly saw it as their country’s mission to spread these universal values and principles outside of their borders and to bring them to other countries. This belief already became evident in the first inaugural address of the twentieth century, when William McKinley tried to reconcile imperialistic actions in Cuba and the Philippines with the nation’s creed and its ideals:

The principles which led to our intervention require that the fundamental law upon which the new government rests should be adapted to secure a government capable of performing the duties and discharging the functions of a separate nation, of observing its international obligations of protecting life and property, insuring order, safety, and liberty, and conforming to the established and historical policy of the United States in its relation to Cuba. The peace which we are pledged to leave to the Cuban people must carry with it the guarantees of permanence. We became sponsors for the pacification of the island, and we remain accountable to the Cubans, no less than to our own country and people, for the reconstruction of Cuba as a free commonwealth on abiding foundations of right, justice, liberty, and assured order.<sup>61</sup>

We are not waging war against the inhabitants of the Philippine Islands. A portion of them are making war against the United States. By far the greater part of the inhabitants recognize American sovereignty and welcome it as a guaranty of order and of security for life, property, liberty, freedom of conscience, and the pursuit of happiness.<sup>62</sup>

In 1917, Woodrow Wilson argued along the same lines to persuade his listeners of America’s benevolent foreign policy objectives in his second inaugural address, delivered one month before the nation’s entry into the European theater of war:

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<sup>61</sup> *McKinley*, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1901.

<sup>62</sup> *McKinley*, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1901.

As some of the injuries done us have become intolerable we have still been clear that we wished nothing for ourselves that we were not ready to demand for all mankind – fair dealing, justice, the freedom to live and to be at ease against organized wrong.<sup>63</sup>

In addition, Wilson declared that the raging world war had turned Americans from “provincials” into “citizens of the world.”<sup>64</sup> However, he ensured his compatriots that this would not dilute American identity or signify the end of the United States’ self-conception as an exceptional and unique country, and thereby dispelled potential worries that Americans were now, to put it bluntly, like everyone else:

And yet we are not the less Americans on that account. We shall be the more American if we but remain true to the principles in which we have been bred. They are not the principles of a province or of a single continent. We have known and boasted all along that they were the principles of a liberated mankind.<sup>65</sup>

This quote by Wilson perfectly illustrates that although the shared ideals and values of Americans are, in fact, universal “principles of a liberated mankind,” they are nonetheless considered to be American ideals, since they are not only nowhere more adhered to and cherished than in the United States, but they also play a crucial role in American ideology as unifying elements which have contributed to a common national identity. This notion that these principles are more prevalent in the United States than anywhere else is further reinforced when Wilson remarked that it would be obsolete to “argue these principles to you, my fellow countrymen [since] they are your own part and parcel of your own thinking and your own motives in affairs,” based on the fact that “[t]hey spring up native amongst us.”<sup>66</sup>

After a final twitch of American isolationism during the interwar years, presidents increasingly expressed their conviction that the United States had to take on the role of the Good Samaritan in the world, bringing liberty, democracy, individual rights, and justice to the oppressed peoples in this world. Furthermore, they frequently justified interventionism with reference to the spread of American ideals as well as their defense and protection. Since America’s increased international importance after World War I and the question of how to handle and deal with this new situation were regularly

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<sup>63</sup> *Wilson*, Second Inaugural Address, March 5, 1917.

<sup>64</sup> *Wilson*, Second Inaugural Address, March 5, 1917.

<sup>65</sup> *Wilson*, Second Inaugural Address, March 5, 1917.

<sup>66</sup> *Wilson*, Second Inaugural Address, March 5, 1917.

discussed in inaugural speeches of the interwar years, although this period was still characterized by an isolationist policy, the universalist interpretation of American values and principles became a constant feature of post-Wilsonian inaugural addresses. Due to the frequency of this trope coupled with space restrictions, I have decided to refrain from listing all presidential quotes on this theme here. Instead, several representative examples are presented below:

We made freedom a birthright. We extended our domain over distant islands in order to safeguard our own interests and accepted the consequent obligation to bestow justice and liberty upon less favored peoples.<sup>67</sup>

The American people stand firm in the faith which has inspired this Nation from the beginning. We believe that all men have a right to equal justice under law and equal opportunity to share in the common good. We believe that all men have the right to freedom of thought and expression. We believe that all men are created equal because they are created in the image of God. From this faith we will not be moved. The American people desire, and are determined to work for, a world in which all nations and all peoples are free to govern themselves as they see fit, and to achieve a decent and satisfying life.<sup>68</sup>

There must be justice, sensed and shared by all peoples, for, without justice the world can know only a tense and unstable truce. There must be law, steadily invoked and respected by all nations, for without law, the world promises only such meager justice as the pity of the strong upon the weak. But the law of which we speak, comprehending the values of freedom, affirms the equality of all nations, great and small.<sup>69</sup>

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 [...] 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.<sup>70</sup>

The peace we seek to win is not victory over any other people, but the peace that comes “with healing in its wings”; with compassion for those who have suffered; with

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<sup>67</sup> *Coolidge*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1925.

<sup>68</sup> *Truman*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1949.

<sup>69</sup> *Eisenhower*, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 1957.

<sup>70</sup> *Kennedy*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.



understanding for those who have opposed us; with the opportunity for all the peoples of this earth to choose their own destiny.<sup>71</sup>

In further consequence, the universalist interpretation of American ideals and the “internationalization” of American values and principles by presidents were extended and developed further. This was due to the fact that, beginning in the mid-twentieth-century, presidents were eager to emphasize that their country’s mission to spread these values and principles in the world was not in vain but actually fell on fertile ground. According to them, nations in all corners of the world sought freedom, equality, and opportunity and consequently followed the political example set by the United States. This reinforced notions of exceptionalism, since, in the eyes of many Americans, it validated the accuracy of their country’s idealized self-image as a political role model for the world and as the world’s “first new nation.”<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, Americans interpreted the proclaimed political Americanization of the world as an indication that the self-imposed ideal of the United States as an exporter of universal humane values and as a Good Samaritan with benevolent and altruistic intentions proved to be true:

Democracy is not dying. [...] We know it because, if we look below the surface, we sense it still spreading on every continent – for it is the most humane, the most advanced, and in the end the most unconquerable of all forms of human society. [...] [T]he spirit of America [...] speaks to us from the other nations of the hemisphere, and from those across the seas – the enslaved, as well as the free.<sup>73</sup>

[W]e hope to help create the conditions that will lead eventually to personal freedom and happiness for all mankind [...]. Slowly but surely we are weaving a world fabric of international security and growing prosperity. We are aided by all who wish to live in freedom from fear – even by those who live today in fear under their own governments. We are aided by all who want relief from the lies of propaganda – who desire truth and sincerity. We are aided by all who desire self-government and a voice in deciding their own affairs. We are aided by all who long for economic security – for the security and abundance that men in free societies can enjoy. We are aided by all who desire freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom to live their own lives for useful ends. Our allies are the millions who hunger and thirst after righteousness. In due time, as our stability becomes manifest, as more and more nations come to know the benefits of

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<sup>71</sup> *Nixon*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1969.

<sup>72</sup> *Lipset*, *The First New Nation*, 2.

<sup>73</sup> *F. Roosevelt*, Third Inaugural Address, January 20, 1941.

democracy and to participate in growing abundance, I believe that those countries which now oppose us will abandon their delusions and join with the free nations of the world in a just settlement of international differences.<sup>74</sup>

Everywhere we see the seeds of the same growth that America itself has known. The American experiment has, for generations, fired the passion and the courage of millions elsewhere seeking freedom, equality, and opportunity.<sup>75</sup>

The world itself is now dominated by a new spirit. Peoples more numerous and more politically aware are craving and now demanding their place in the sun – not just for the benefit of their own physical condition, but for basic human rights.<sup>76</sup>

Since the turn of the century, the number of democracies in the world has grown fourfold. Human freedom is on the march, and nowhere more so than our own hemisphere. Freedom is one of the deepest and noblest aspirations of the human spirit. People, worldwide, hunger for the right of self-determination, for those inalienable rights that make for human dignity and progress.<sup>77</sup>

Great nations of the world are moving toward democracy through the door to freedom. Men and women of the world move toward free markets through the door to prosperity. The people of the world agitate for free expression and free thought through the door to the moral and intellectual satisfactions that only liberty allows.<sup>78</sup>

But our greatest strength is the power of our ideas, which are still new in many lands. Across the world, we see them embraced – and we rejoice. Our hopes, our hearts, our hands, are with those on every continent who are building democracy and freedom. Their cause is America's cause.<sup>79</sup>

Through much of the last century, America's faith in freedom and democracy was a rock in a raging sea. Now it is a seed upon the wind, taking root in many nations. Our democratic faith is more than the creed of our country, it is the inborn hope of our humanity, an ideal we carry but do not own, a trust we bear and pass along.<sup>80</sup>

America's vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and

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<sup>74</sup> *Truman*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1949.

<sup>75</sup> *Eisenhower*, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 1957.

<sup>76</sup> *Carter*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1977.

<sup>77</sup> *Reagan*, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 1985.

<sup>78</sup> G. H. W. *Bush*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1989.

<sup>79</sup> *Clinton*, First Inaugural Address, January 21, 1993.

<sup>80</sup> G. W. *Bush*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 2001.

dignity, and matchless value, because they bear the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth. Across the generations we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave. Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation. It is the honorable achievement of our fathers. Now it is the urgent requirement of our nation's security, and the calling of our time.<sup>81</sup>

Among all inaugurations, the “internationalization” of American values and principles, without a doubt, reached its climax with Dwight D. Eisenhower's first inaugural address. America's thirty-fourth president not only proclaimed that ideals such as liberty, equality, individualism, and justice applied to all the people in the world and thus ought to be spread all over the world by the United States. Eisenhower gave an internationalist dimension to the entire American creed itself by portraying it as a “common bond” of all the free people in the world:

The faith we hold belongs not to us alone but to the free of all the world. This common bond binds the grower of rice in Burma and the planter of wheat in Iowa, the shepherd in southern Italy and the mountaineer in the Andes. It confers a common dignity upon the French soldier who dies in Indo-China, the British soldier killed in Malaya, the American life given in Korea.<sup>82</sup>

Eisenhower's global civil creed comprising all free world citizens perfectly suits the general tone and dialectical structure of his first inaugural address, which is dominated by America's political-military power struggle with the Soviet Union. Thus, its language is laden with Cold War rhetoric which juxtaposes “the ‘light’ of Western democratic systems in opposition to the “darkness” of the Communist Soviet Union and its Eastern bloc. Likewise, Eisenhower's predecessor Harry S. Truman had also contrasted “the faith [...] which has inspired [the American] Nation from the beginning” with the “false philosophy”<sup>83</sup> of Communism. What is even more interesting is that Truman had already foreshadowed the universalist dimension of the American creed, on which Eisenhower elaborated in more detail four years later. Truman's internationalist foreign policy perspective became apparent when he directed his remarks about America's ideals and principles as the first president in inaugural history

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<sup>81</sup> G. W. Bush, Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 2005.

<sup>82</sup> Eisenhower, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1953.

<sup>83</sup> Truman, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1949.

at a global audience, since he deemed it “fitting [...] that we take this occasion to proclaim to the world the essential principles of the faith by which we live, and to declare our aims to all peoples.”<sup>84</sup> Before Truman, inaugural addresses had primarily served as a means to unite the nation as well as to make Americans acquainted with the political philosophy of their newly (re-)elected president. Truman, however, broke with this tradition, since he gave his speech with a global audience in mind, who he tried to familiarize with traditional American values and ideals. The internationalization of the inaugural genre itself illustrates the United States’ increased global relevance after World War II and was manifested further in both of Eisenhower’s inaugural addresses, since he followed Truman’s example and directly addressed the world audience in his inaugural speeches. Since then this practice has been repeated by several subsequent presidents.

#### **4.5. The duty of putting American principles into practice**

Finally, a third common custom among presidents that is reflected in the genre of inaugural addresses is the propensity to underscore the necessity of putting the nation’s ideals and principles into practice. While nineteenth-century presidents had merely discussed American values per se and emphasized their central importance and sanctity as well as their universalist character, the twentieth century brought a new aspect to light. Fueled by pragmatism, presidents pointed out that it was not enough to talk and theorize about these ideals. Rather, they deemed it essential that Americans gradually made these ideals an integral part of their own lives. It was considered equally important that the domestic and foreign policy of the United States reflected these values and principles if the country wanted to truly fulfill its responsibility as a benevolent leader, as Jimmy Carter pointed out:

For this truth must be clear before us: whatever America hopes to bring to pass in the world must first come to pass in the heart of America. The peace we seek, then, is nothing

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<sup>84</sup> *Truman*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1949.

less than the practice and fulfillment of our whole faith among ourselves and in our dealings with others.<sup>85</sup>

However, the fact that the United States had not yet fully translated their highly valued ideals into action was not seen as a failure by twentieth-century presidents. Americans view the history of their country as a gradual realization of the promises and ideals that sprang from the Revolution and the nation's struggle for independence. Consequently, the American experiment is considered a still ongoing event and the nation's revolution not fully completed, as the country and its citizens gradually approximate the ideals laid out for them. This sentiment is reflected in the inaugural address of President Calvin Coolidge:

These are some of the principles which America represents. We have not by any means put them fully into practice, but we have strongly signified our belief in them. The encouraging feature of our country is not that it has reached its destination, but that it has overwhelmingly expressed its determination to proceed in the right direction.<sup>86</sup>

According to Coolidge's successor Herbert Hoover, putting those ideals fully into practice is not an easy task and demands time and patience. Moreover, the thirty-first President of the United States noted that attaining this end requires experience and that Americans draw the right lessons from the past. For Hoover, the best practice to accomplish this is a strong adherence to the American creed and to the wisdom of the Founding Fathers:

There is no short road to the realization of these aspirations. Ours is a progressive people, but with a determination that progress must be based upon the foundation of experience. [...] But if we hold the faith of the men in our mighty past who created these ideals, we shall leave them heightened and strengthened for our children.<sup>87</sup>

Successive presidents, like Dwight D. Eisenhower, tried to give concrete content to this vision and thus outlined foreign policy strategies which comply with and reflect American principles such as freedom, equality, and individualism:

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<sup>85</sup> *Carter*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1977.

<sup>86</sup> *Coolidge*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1925.

<sup>87</sup> *Hoover*, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1929.

Only in respecting the hopes and cultures of others will we practice the equality of all nations. Only as we show willingness and wisdom in giving counsel – in receiving counsel – and in sharing burdens, will we wisely perform the work of peace.<sup>88</sup>

Pursuing the same objectives, Eisenhower’s successor John F. Kennedy directly addressed the “sister republics” of the United States:

To our sister republics south of our border, we offer a special pledge – to convert our good words into good deeds – in a new alliance for progress – to assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty. But this peaceful revolution of hope cannot become the prey of hostile powers. Let all our neighbors know that we shall join with them to oppose aggression or subversion anywhere in the Americas. And let every other power know that this Hemisphere intends to remain the master of its own house.<sup>89</sup>

At the same time, however, presidents emphasized that not only the intercourse with other nations had to reflect the ideals and values encapsulated in the American creed. The same held true for and had to be attained in the domestic realm of U.S. politics. According to their presidents, Americans could not be content until the blessings of liberty, equality, individuality, and opportunity had been extended to every single one of their fellow compatriots:

But there are many mountains yet to climb. We will not rest until every American enjoys the fullness of freedom, dignity, and opportunity as our birthright. It is our birthright as citizens of this great Republic, and we'll meet this challenge.<sup>90</sup>

That is our generation’s task – to make these words, these rights, these values – of Life, and Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness – real for every American. Being true to our founding documents does not require us to agree on every contour of life; it does not mean we all define liberty in exactly the same way, or follow the same precise path to happiness. Progress does not compel us to settle centuries-long debates about the role of government for all time – but it does require us to act in our time.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> *Eisenhower*, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 1957.

<sup>89</sup> *Kennedy*, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.

<sup>90</sup> *Reagan*, Second Inaugural Address, January 21, 1985.

<sup>91</sup> *Obama*, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009.

#### 4.6. Conclusion

United States presidents promote national values encapsulated in the American creed in order to unite the people and to constitute the heterogeneous society as one united nation. These shared ideals are a vital source of identity, since American nationality is ideologically defined. Due to their unifying and identity-establishing function as well as their central importance concerning American self-conception, these shared principles and values enjoy an exceptional and sacrosanct status within the United States. Furthermore, the fact that these ideals are linked to the Founding Fathers and allegedly helped to guide the country through the struggle for independence and the young nation's difficult early years, has contributed to their sanctity and inviolability. They connect the country's past to its present and future, and provide Americans with a sense of direction and purpose. In addition, the principles of the American creed are viewed as the foundation for the success of the American experiment as well as the bedrock of the American Dream and the Pursuit of Happiness, which are considered as "the God-given right of every American."<sup>92</sup>

Due to their eminent standing in the United States, it is hardly surprising that American presidents have not only employed shared ideals and values in order to reinforce unity and identity among their compatriots. Beyond that, the nation's highest political leaders have also invoked such principles and propositions in their inaugural addresses in order "to mobilize support for the attainment of national goals."<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, similar to the instrumentalization of religious myths in presidential inaugurals, the ideals of the American creed have been cited to legitimate war and justify decisions taken on the national level. Another function of these shared ideals and values has been to promote and strengthen certain idealized images of the United States. By emphasizing that the country remains committed to these American values in all circumstances – even during times of war – presidents have reinforced their country's idealized self-image as a shining example of morale and virtue. Closely linked to this custom is the practice of American presidents to stress their nation's altruistic foreign policy objectives. In doing so they have promoted – both within as well as outside of the American borders – the image of the United States as a benevolent nation that

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<sup>92</sup> *Nixon*, Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 1973.

<sup>93</sup> Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, 13.

always pursues well-meaning purposes and aims to act as a Good Samaritan on a global scale. As I have shown, this idealized notion of the United States combined with the conviction of the universalism of American core beliefs helped to legitimize the conquest of the West in the nineteenth century and was later used to justify U.S. imperialism in Cuba and the Philippines. Furthermore, this sentiment became reinforced over the course of the twentieth century, when the two world wars turned the country into a global force and American presidents increasingly saw it as the mission of the United States to spread American political values and principles throughout the world. This again fueled U.S. interventionism in the second half of the twentieth century, which, for instance, led to the collective national trauma of the Vietnam War. Political crises like this one have been explained with a departure from the set of shared ideals and thus presidents have called for a return to these ideals, whenever they felt that their country had strayed from the right path. Furthermore, national setbacks have been ascribed to “the contradictions between American ‘deeds and creed,’”<sup>94</sup> which Gunnar Myrdal deemed the “American dilemma.”<sup>95</sup> Consequently, presidents likewise have pointed out that the venerable ideals of the American creed needed to be put into practice (in order to bridge the gap between ideal and reality) and brought into accordance with temporary needs.

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<sup>94</sup> *Beasley, You, the People*, 65.

<sup>95</sup> *Myrdal, An American Dilemma*.



## 5. Concluding summary

In this thesis, I have shown which religious myths have been employed by United States presidents in their inaugural addresses. Furthermore, I have examined which of the nation's highest political leaders have made use of the respective religiously inspired mythic concepts. This included an analysis of the changes, developments, and abundance patterns of these myths within the inaugural genre. As I have found out, most religious tropes occur more frequently in inaugural addresses of the twentieth (and twenty-first century) than in their equivalents of the nineteenth century. A few of these myths did not even appear in the inaugural genre before the beginning of the nineteenth century. Whether this increase in religiously charged rhetoric is indeed related to the advent of the so-called "rhetorical presidency," as presumed, must be investigated by future research. It is a fact, however, that twentieth-century presidents distinguished themselves from their nineteenth-century counterparts through a more self-assured interpretation of their nation's relationship to God. Especially after World War II, America's humble reliance on God's support and divine guidance was replaced with a commitment to act as God's agent who implemented the divine plan. Likewise, America's transition from an isolationist "city upon a hill" to a nation that regarded itself as a benevolent leader, which shaped world politics and lead by example, also took place in the twentieth century. This change in self-conception went hand-in-hand with the ascent of the United States to the position of world power and also had an effect on the inaugural genre itself, as presidents, after World War II, not only spoke to their compatriots but gave their inaugurals with a global audience in mind.

Since presidents not only "offer civic ideologies or myths of civic identity,"<sup>1</sup> but also explore the relationship of the American nation to God and reference religious concepts and images in their inaugurals, they not only serve as political leaders but – at least for the period of their respective inaugurals – also as spiritual ones. In this context, it should be noted once again that whenever presidents invoke or reference God in their inaugurals, this act is "neither sectarian nor in any specific sense Christian."<sup>2</sup> The God of the American civil religion is unaffiliated with any religious sect or denomination and everybody who believes in the existence of any form of deity can relate to it.

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<sup>1</sup> *Smith*, *Civic Ideals*, 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Bellah*, *Civil Religion in America*, 8.

In the second part of the thesis' main body, I have presented and discussed the central habitual tendencies and conventions concerning the ways American presidents have communicated and interpreted shared ideals of the American creed. These included the custom to emphasize the grand importance and sanctity of these national values. Another commonality among presidents is their shared belief in the universalist quality of American values. Furthermore, a third common feature is the tendency of presidents to discuss the duty of Americans to put these theoretical ideals encapsulated in the American creed into practice. On top of that, these values and principles have been frequently linked to the religious theme of sacrifice.

As the preceding analysis has shown, religious myths and references as well as the ideals of the American creed fulfill very similar functions in inaugural addresses. The most frequent one is to promote unity and to generate and reinforce collective identity. Since American nationhood, unlike the national identity of most other countries, is based on shared values and ideals rather than descent, history, or ethnic composition, the commitment of Americans to these unifying elements is necessary in order to sustain what Benedict Anderson dubbed an "imagined community," where "members [...] will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."<sup>3</sup> In the United States' heterogeneous society, presidential inaugural addresses thus represent a "sorely needed message of national unity" and constitute "rare reminders of the presence of collective needs and goals."<sup>4</sup> However, despite the central importance of these myths and ideals as unifying and identity-establishing elements, it would be an incomplete analysis to confine their role in inaugural addresses to this lone purpose, since, as I have discussed and outlined, they can fulfill and take on a range of functions.

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<sup>3</sup> *Anderson*, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Beasley*, *The Rhetoric of Ideological Consensus in the United States*, 180.

## 6. Outlook on future research

It would not only be hyperbolic but simply wrong to suggest that I have exhausted this subject in my thesis. As I have outlined in the introductory chapter, the initial research aim of this study was to examine how all of the prototypical American myths and elements of the American creed have been invoked and interpreted in the rhetoric of United States presidents. However, as it soon became apparent that this endeavor would far exceed the scope of a master's thesis, due to the abundance and variety of myths and idealized images that are woven into the inaugural genre, the area of investigation had to be narrowed down considerably. Consequently, such an academic undertaking must be achieved by future, more voluminous research efforts, for instance, as part of a PhD project.

As I was hopefully able to demonstrate the utility and value of a more pragmatic and empirical approach to American myths and ideals, many more related and similar questions and subject matters, which fall outside the scope of this paper, could and should be considered by subsequent studies. For instance, it will remain for future research to examine how the venerable ideals of the American Dream and the "pursuit of happiness" as well as myths derived from these two ideals (for example, the "from-rags-to-riches" legend) have been employed in presidential inaugurals. One might also investigate the secularly informed notions of American exceptionalism, such as the idea of the United States as the "first new nation,"<sup>1</sup> as well as the implications of their occurrence in inaugural addresses. The same holds true for myths concerning the American nature and geography (for instance the frontier myth), which have also contributed to the conception of the United States as an exceptional country. Concerning the American creed, future studies could individually analyze the various principles and values encapsulated in the American creed, including the ways American presidents have presented these ideals in their inaugural speeches. Furthermore, another fertile field for subsequent investigation would be offered by the oft-used inaugural theme of American concord and unity as well as the mythic and idealized images and narratives concerning the American people, their sacred scriptures, and the most

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<sup>1</sup> *Lipset*, *The First New Nation*, 2.

prominent figures in the United States' national pantheon (for example, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln).

Although presidential inaugurals, as “mythic discourses”<sup>2</sup> and “public meditations on national values and identity,”<sup>3</sup> are characterized by a special link to the American national ideology and its myths and thus make an ideal subject for this kind of research, I hope that my thesis stimulates further investigation of the American creed and of American myths based on a more pragmatic and empirical approach also outside of the inaugural genre. The extension of this approach might help us to better understand how Americans view themselves as well as how they want to be seen by the rest of the world. In other words, this type of study may shed additional light on the mythic concepts and themes as well as on the construction of American identity, which has been shaped and continues to be influenced by these myths and ideals.

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<sup>2</sup> *Beasley*, *The Rhetoric of Ideological Consensus in the United States*, 175.

<sup>3</sup> *Campbell & Jamieson*, *Presidents Creating the Presidency*, 334.

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## **8. Appendix**

### **8.1. Abstract (English)**

This paper examines how religious myths and ideals encapsulated in the American creed have been employed in the inaugural addresses of United States presidents. The goal thereby is to examine which political actors have promoted the various types of religiously inspired mythic concepts and the ways in which this has happened as well as to uncover changes, developments, and abundance patterns of these myths within the oratorical tradition of inaugural addresses. Another primary objective is to identify constant elements, structured regularities, and breaks concerning the usage of these mythic tropes. Furthermore, this thesis aims to find and uncover habitual tendencies and conventions in the ways American presidents have presented American values and ideals in their inaugural speeches. In order to achieve this objective, I have examined all fifty-seven inaugurals of U.S. presidents, delivered between 1789 and 2013.

The thesis starts out with an introductory chapter providing essential background information on the topic. The subsequent section introduces and carefully defines some of the terms and concepts used throughout the paper. Then the main part shifts the discussion to the occurrence and interpretation of various religiously inspired mythic ideals as well as the portrayal of shared values and principles of the American creed in the inaugural speeches of United States presidents. This is followed by a concluding summary outlining the key findings of the study, including the main functions religiously inspired rhetoric of consensus fulfills in presidential inaugurals. Finally, a section on potential future research in this field closes the discussion of religious myths and principles of the American creed in inaugural addresses.

### **8.2. Abstract (German)**

Die vorliegende Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit der Verwendung und Instrumentalisierung von religiösen Mythen und Elementen der amerikanischen Zivilreligion (American creed) in den Antrittsreden amerikanischer Präsidenten. Zu diesem Zweck wurden alle

57 Inaugurationsadressen, welche zwischen 1789 und 2013 im Abstand von vier Jahren von den Präsidenten der USA gehalten wurden, untersucht.

Während in den meisten anderen Ländern das Nationalbewusstsein auf Gemeinsamkeiten wie einer gemeinsamen Geschichte, Sprache, Kultur, oder Ethnizität beruht, ist die nationale Zugehörigkeit in den USA ideologisch begründet und basiert auf gesellschaftlichen Idealen, Überzeugungen, und Mythen, welche in der amerikanischen Zivilreligion zusammengefasst sind. Aufgrund ihrer Funktion als wichtigste Quelle Gemeinsamkeitsglauben vermittelnder und erzeugender bzw. identitätsstiftender Elemente werden diese Narrative und Leitbilder auch in den präsidentiellen Inaugurationsadressen vielfach instrumentalisiert. Auf diese Weise wird versucht, die amerikanische Bevölkerung nach den parteipolitischen Fehden des Präsidentschaftswahlkampfes wiederum als eine Nation und ein Volk zu vereinen, welches durch die Verkörperung und das Bekenntnis zu bestimmten Idealen und Werten zusammengeschweißt wird und sich auf Basis dieser von StaatsbürgerInnen anderer Nationen maßgeblich unterscheidet. Darüber hinaus sind amerikanische Präsidenten bestrebt, ihre politischen Ansichten und Prinzipien in ihren Antrittsreden in Einklang mit den symbolischen Erzählungen des Landes und dessen Idealen zu bringen bzw. ein bestimmtes Bild der USA zu propagieren. Vielfach machen sich politische Akteure auch die ideologische Mobilisierungskraft erwähnter Dogmen, Ideale, und Werte zunutze, um zukünftige oder bereits getroffene Entscheidungen zu legitimieren bzw., im Fall von ersterem, die dafür notwendige Unterstützung zu erlangen.

Nach einer umfassenden Einführung in die Thematik bzw. Diskussion von relevanten Begrifflichkeiten und Hintergrundwissen widmet sich der Hauptteil der Arbeit den jeweiligen religiösen Mythen und amerikanischen Idealen. Diese werden benannt und vorgestellt bzw. deren Verwendung und Auftreten in den präsidentiellen Inaugurationsadressen analysiert und beleuchtet. Die zentrale Zielsetzung dabei ist es, herauszufinden, wie diese mythischen Dogmen und amerikanischen Werte in den Antrittsreden der Präsidenten kommuniziert und interpretiert werden. Außerdem untersucht die Arbeit die Entwicklung und Genese religiöser Mythen innerhalb des Redegenres der amerikanischen Inaugurationsadressen und begibt sich auf die Suche nach konstanten Elementen, Gewichtungen, und Abundanzen betreffend der Verwendung dieser religiöser Mythen in den Antrittsreden amerikanischer Präsidenten.

### 8.3. Curriculum vitae

#### **Ralph Neumayer**

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#### **Education:**

- 2007–2015      **University of Vienna, Austria**  
teaching qualification program for English and History  
(secondary school teaching)
- 2010–2011      **St. John’s University, Minnesota**  
Fulbright scholarship; completed all courses (including one  
English capstone course on current issues in literary studies) with  
a grade of A at the departments for English, History, and  
Education; Teaching assistant at the German department
- 1997–2005      **Bundesrealgymnasium & Bundesoberstufenrealgymnasium  
St. Pölten, Lower Austria**  
lower and upper secondary education; high school with a  
linguistic profile (English, French, and Latin) and a focus on  
musical education; graduated with honors
- 2001–2004      **Bundesnachwuchszentrum St. Pölten, Lower Austria**  
soccer academy
- 1993–1997      **Volksschule Pottenbrunn, Lower Austria**  
primary education

#### **Military service:**

- 2005–2006      **Military base “Kopal” in St. Pölten, Lower Austria**  
April 2006: Promotion to Private (OR-2)

#### **Relevant work experience:**

- 2011–ongoing      **Upper and lower secondary teacher of English and History at  
Bundesgymnasium & Bundesrealgymnasium Groß-  
Enzersdorf and Bundesoberstufenrealgymnasium  
Neulengbach**  
secondary school teacher; A-level examination experience; form  
tutor; organization of field and language trips

2005–ongoing	<b>Private tuition</b> English, German, and History
2010–2011	<b>St. John’s University, Minnesota</b> Teaching assistant at the German Department
Nov/Jan 2009/10	<b>Internship at Realgymnasium Theodor-Kramer-Straße, Vienna</b> English teaching assistant
Mar/May 2010	<b>Internship at Lise Meitner Realgymnasium Schottenbastei, Vienna</b> Teaching assistant for History
Summer jobs 2003–2006	<b>City council St. Pölten, Lower Austria</b> <b>Georg Fischer Automotive AG, Herzogenburg, Lower Austria</b> Department quality assurance & product research and development

**Additional skills and interests:**

- Microsoft Office, Macintosh OS, various online learning platforms
- Foreign language skills: English, French, Latin
- Amateur soccer player for several Austrian fourth and fifth division teams (multiple team captain and alternate captain selection)
- Activities and interests: literature and history, American studies, (U.S.) sports, playing the guitar and ukulele, music, film & media studies, cultural studies, traveling, foreign countries and cultures, certified scuba diver