

# POWERFUL LEADERS

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## THE USE OF RELIGION TO FURTHER POLITICAL AGENDA IN ANCIENT ROME AND THE UNITED STATES

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This research paper examines the found similarities between powerful leaders in Ancient Rome and powerful political figures in the U.S, focusing on the use of religion/religious rhetoric to further political agenda. Utilizing famous speeches, historical backgrounds, and political statistics, a deep dive was compiled to outline how religion has been used in two successful and powerful countries, and reveal the power religion holds with political agendas. An analysis of speeches by Roman leader Augustus, evangelist advisor Paula White, President Ronald Reagan, Abraham Lincoln, George Bush, in addition to Pope Urban II and Roman Emperor Constantine are examined to connect similar political tactics. Findings of the research show almost identical use of religious weaponization for political agendas in both distinguished Ancient Roman leaders and prominent figures in American Politics. More specifically, this research defines the ways in which leaders have weaponized religion to build their leadership, expand influence, create a solid foundation for their authority to flourish, and justify war.

## Introduction

Religion has provided comfort, structure, instruction and guided many in their way of life. It serves as the foundation for many personal ethical values, day-to-day life, and individual character building, giving many a purpose, a mission, and a community. However, many political leaders have discovered a different use for religion and the influence it carries: politics. Since ancient Rome, some of the most powerful and revolutionary emperors and leaders our world has ever seen have found religion to not just be an idea or way of life, but also a tool. The wielding and weaponizing of religion has played a significant role in defining control, influence, and ultimate sovereignty through the threat of divine punishment, the power in the sense of religious community, and the shield and support it provides for political decisions. In modern governments, such as the United States, almost identical methods continue to be used to influence. American politicians gain voters and political support, as well as wage war under divine sanction. In this, we can draw on the surprising parallel tactics of political leaders in ancient Rome and the United States when analyzing the various forms of religious weaponization.

### Ancient Rome

The presence of religion and divine

punishment began early in the Ancient Roman civilization. While the Roman Empire had a presence of early Judaism and Christianity, it began primarily as a polytheistic civilization practicing the worship of a variety of gods and goddesses (“Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Rome”). The deities of the Roman Civilization heavily affected their day-to-day actions, dictating the lives of Roman citizens in nearly every way. Temples were built, festivals were held, and offerings were presented in order to honor their gods. In exchange for these lavish rituals of honor and fealty, the Roman citizens hoped for the favor of the gods and, in turn, attributed all prosperity to the satisfaction of the gods. Similarly, all unfavorable circumstances and debacles were attributed to the anger and dissatisfaction of the gods. It is here that the fear of angering God(s) begins and paves the way for the use of divine punishment in the forthcoming years.

As the Roman Empire began to evolve, so did the utilization of divine punishment. Roman leaders began to recognize the weight of the divine and spun it to their political favor. One of the first to masterfully wield this tactic, Roman leader Augustus fought his way into power using religion and divine influence to further his political agenda. Augustus sought to restore Rome’s traditional values, public monuments, and

revive religion. He even went as far as to establish the Imperial Cult for the worship of the emperor (himself) as a god. This practice spread wide throughout the Roman empire and was eventually considered an important part of Roman religion. Augustus was aware of the fragility of his position as Roman emperor and cleverly weaponized the sole power he knew Roman citizens both respected and feared. Being the Emperor of Rome was already the most powerful earthly position a man could hold, but for Augustus, this was not enough. He wanted a piece of divinity and the power it held (“Religion in Ancient Rome”). Augustus’s tactic was a clever one, as he promoted himself as a son of God as a means to advocate for the restoration of Rome’s traditional values and practices (“Religion in Ancient Rome”). Augustus’s goal came into existence as the people of Rome gave him the divine power he had been striving for. “Octavian, the young Caesar, was received at Rome like a deity in 36, as is attested both in the honors extended to him and in the criticism the honors provoked. The present discussion examines the victorious Octavian’s *reditus* and *ovatio* in 36 in terms of the evolution of a theology of a Roman savior” (Luke). By forming his image around being sent from God, he imposes the implicit threat of Divine wrath on the citizens of Rome if they were to disagree with his political

choices, as no one would wish to challenge the mission of God.

## Religious Rhetoric

### Donald Trump

In 2017, we saw a striking parallel between Augustus’s weaponization of divine punishment and that of Paula White—an evangelist advisor of the Trump Administration. During a panel interview, Paula White preaches on the statement that Trump has been anointed into his presidency by God himself, and to oppose Trump’s policies would be to “go against the plan of God” proclaiming that his opponents, by extension, are an affront to the Almighty (Graves-Fitzsimmons, “Jack Jenkins Trump’s ‘God Whisperer’”). Her target demographic being Christian conservatives, she paints President Trump much like Augustus painted himself as ‘sent from God’ and utilizes the fear of disobeying God or being an unfit Christian as means to push the demographic to side with Trump’s policies as well as his Presidential status. The claim that God has raised Trump for leadership is common among a certain subset of Trump’s religious advisers—namely, Christian nationalists. Like White, rightwing evangelicals such as Robert Jeffress and Lance Wallnau have repeatedly claimed that Trump has been placed into power by the Almighty and that while he may not be morally perfect, neither were

other kings such as Cyrus and David, who were appointed by God in the Old Testament” (“Jack Jenkins Trump’s ‘God Whisperer’”). Compared to the outright threat used by White and the Trump Administration, the religious weaponization used by Augustus was much more implied than verbal. However, the similarities are uncanny as they both employ the fear of divine punishment to push their political agendas.

While the threat of divine punishment proves to be frequent and politically effective for Roman and American Leaders, others have taken a slightly different approach; still weaponizing religion, but as a means of gaining the mass majority through a sense of community and empowerment. Instead of heavily imposing the threat of divine punishment, Roman Emperor Constantine embraces and legalizes Christianity, creating a unified sense of community and power for the people. In return, he was able to create a solid foundation for himself in the process. Constantine viewed himself as guardian of the Christian Church and strived for unanimity within. He presided over multiple church councils as they resolved theological questions in pursuit of establishing an orthodoxy over quandaries that threatened to divide the church, and by extension, him and his empire (Schall). In his preceding over churches and the Christian religion itself,

Constantine creates an opportunity not only for Rome to grow religiously, but for his power to grow as well. “The political opportunity that accompanied the Christian minority amongst the empire was recognized by Constantine and was a key factor in building his support base within the empire” (“Politics and Religion in Ancient Rome”). By unifying a large aspect of Rome through religious rule, Constantine lowers the chance of rebellion which was historically proven to be a tedious problem for the aristocracy of Rome. Although Constantine is most well known for being a religious monarch who revolutionized religion in Rome by the legalization of Christianity, he was also a highly skilled politician who utilized the opportunity of religion to expand his empire and influence (Barnes 1-26).

### **Ronald Reagan**

Like Constantine, former U.S. president Ronald Reagan heavily embraced Christianity and was not bashful about promoting it through his presidency. And once again, like Constantine, his promotion and endorsement of the Christian faith brought him more power, securing the majority support of conservatives and white evangelicals. “Reagan saw an opportunity to use religion to forge a political realignment in the South. Addressing a crowd of 10,000 religious leaders at an “Ecumenical Prayer Breakfast” during the 1984

Republican Convention, the President delivered a rousing speech. Reagan willfully blurred the line between church and state. “Religion needs defenders against those who care only for the interests of the state. The truth is politics and morality are inseparable — and as morality’s foundation is religion, religion and politics are necessarily related.” He concluded: “If we ever forget that we’re one nation under God, then we will be a nation gone under” (Gillon).

Multiple times, Reagan utilizes this biblical context to secure the support of conservative Christians in order to link their religious beliefs to his social policy agendas. In addition, he also appealed to the bible in order to support military and fiscal policy. In 1985, before a group of trade representatives, he used Luke 14:31-32 (a parable about counting the cost of discipleship) in order to support his proposition of a military budget increase (Siker). Reagan’s use of religion and broadcasted support of evangelical Christian ideology benefited him significantly as the previous few decades had shown a significant spike in individuals identifying as evangelical Christians. In this, the connection can be drawn between Constantine capitalizing on Christianity—a religion that had been growing in numbers, and Ronald Reagan centering his leadership heavily around Christianity while

conservative Christians had begun to populate the political sphere.

### **Abraham Lincoln**

History also shows that both Roman and American leaders have used the promotion of a religion not just as means to further political influence, but as a justification and reasoning for political decisions—good or bad. In many cases, U.S presidents have used instrumental religious rhetoric when making an argument based on religious concepts or beliefs in order to convince interested parties to support their goals, such as passing a piece of legislation or backing up a decision made (O’Connell 1). On October 26, 1862, Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president of the United States, utilized this religious rhetoric to justify the 1861 Civil War between the north and the south. “If I had had my way, this war would never have been commenced; If I had been allowed my way, this war would have been ended before this, but we find it still continues; and we must believe that He permits it for some wise purpose of his own, mysterious and unknown to us; and though with our limited understandings we may not be able to comprehend it, yet we cannot but believe, that he who made the world still governs it” (“Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln”). Lincoln’s employed rhetoric places the reasoning for the continuation of the Civil War

in God's hands instead of his own, as he connotes a God who intercedes in human affairs like the civil war as means of accomplishing his objectives. Lincoln's repeated references to God provided support and rallied Union supporters in a time of battle, using religion and divine justification as political tools.

While Lincoln's use of religious rhetoric was used to comfort the people with the sense of reasoning and divine logic, we see a different take from Pope Urban II during his 1095 Crusades speech. "On November 27, 1095, Pope Urban II makes perhaps the most influential speech of the Middle Ages, giving rise to the first Crusades by calling all Christians in Europe to war against Muslims in order to reclaim the Holy Land, with a cry of "Deus vult!" or "God wills it!" ("Christianity: War"). In further appraisal of his speech, it can be seen that "God Wills it" is used as means of placing the responsibility and justification of starting the war into 'Gods' hands as he 'wills it'. The claim of having a mission given directly from God is also not a strategy exclusive to the rulers of past civilizations, though. In June of 2003, President George Bush draws upon similar religious justification as he claims he was told by God to invade Iraq and attack Osama bin Laden's stronghold of Afghanistan as part of a

divine mission to bring peace to the Middle East, security for Israel, and a state for the Palestinians (Cornwell). "I feel God's words coming to me: 'Go get the Palestinians their state and get the Israelis their security and get peace in the Middle East.' And by God, I'm gonna do it." (Cornwell). In his words, we can see a striking similarity to Pope Urban II's exclamation, "God wills it!" In waging war over divine sanction, President Bush gives the invasion of Iraq religious justification, making it much more difficult to criticize. While the deliveries and context of Lincoln and Pope Urban II/George Bush were certainly different, they share the prominent theme of religious rhetoric in order to rally support in a time of war.

### **Conclusion**

While significant differences do lie in the leadership styles of many Roman and American leaders, the shared use of politically driven religious tactics remains a prevalent theme. The success of Augustus's tactic, presenting himself as a supreme religious leader sent to do God's bidding, displays the weight of divine power and the fear of infringing it. Paula White and the Trump Administration used nearly this same approach, aggressively implying the consequences of opposing Trump's Policies by presenting him just as Augustus presented himself-sent from God. The potential threat of divine punishment was

an effective use of religious weaponization, yet other leaders like Constantine and Ronald Reagan focused on the use of religion to seize the numbers and create a unified community building their power and support. Building their leadership on the time's prominent religion, they expanded their influence and built a solid foundation for their authority. In trying times, people look to their leader for answers, reasoning, and motivation. Abraham Lincoln, Pope Urban II, and George Bush make excellent use of God and religious rhetoric as a method of justification and means of rallying their supporters to look to God instead of them in times of trial and tribulation. In these examples, few of many, it is displayed the nearly identical use of religious weaponization for political agendas in both distinguished Ancient Roman leaders and prominent figures in American Politics.

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