"A deftly detailed history of Christianity's service to capitalism in the United States." —*New Republic*

One Nation Under God

How Corporate America Invented Christian America

Kevin M. Kruse

INTRODUCTION

The inauguration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower was much more than a political ceremony. It was, in many ways, a religious consecration.

Though such a characterization might startle us today, the voters who elected Eisenhower twice by overwhelming margins would not have been surprised. In his acceptance speech at the 1952 Republican National Convention, he promised that the coming campaign would be a "great crusade for freedom." As he traveled across America that summer, Eisenhower met often with Reverend Billy Graham, his close friend, to receive spiritual guidance and recommendations for passages of Scripture to use in his speeches. Indeed, the Republican nominee talked so much about spirituality on the stump that legendary *New York Times* reporter Scotty Reston likened his campaign to "William Jennings Bryan's old invasion of the Bible Belt during the Chautauqua circuit days." On election day, Americans answered his call. Eisenhower won 55 percent of the popular vote and a staggering 442-to-89 margin in the Electoral College. Reflecting on the returns, Eisenhower saw nothing less than a mandate for a national religious revival. "I think one of the reasons I was elected was to help lead this country spiritually," he confided to Graham. "We *need* a spiritual renewal."[1]

The inaugural ceremonies on January 20, 1953, set the tone for the new administration. Some of Eisenhower's supporters tried to get Congress to designate it a National Day of Prayer, but even without such an official blessing, the day still had all the markings of one. In the past, incoming presidents had attended religious services on the morning of their inauguration, but usually discreetly. Before Harry Truman's inauguration in 1949, for instance, the president, his family, and a few cabinet officials

made an unannounced visit to St. John's Episcopal Church for a brief fifteen-minute service, with only a few regular parishioners witnessing the moment. Eisenhower, in contrast, turned spirituality into spectacle. At a transition meeting with his cabinet nominees, he announced that they and their families were invited to a special religious service at National Presbyterian Church the morning of the inauguration. "He added hastily as an afterthought that, of course, no Cabinet member should feel under pressure to go to the Presbyterian services," remembered Sherman Adams, his chief of staff; "anybody could go instead to a church of his own choice." But given a choice between worshiping with the president or worshiping without him, almost all chose the former. More than 150 supporters joined the extended Eisenhower clan for the services. The event had been publicized widely in the press, so the attendees arrived to find the church completely full; a crowd of eight hundred more huddled outside in the morning chill. This presidential prayer service had echoes across Washington. All of the city's Catholic churches opened for the occasion, while many Jewish and Protestant houses of worship did the same, acting on their own initiative. St. John's Episcopal, for instance, offered a series of prayer services for the public, every hour on the hour. The *Washington Post* reported that even the city's first mosque, still under construction, would nevertheless be open "for all Moslems . . . who wish to invoke Allah's aid for the Republican administration."[2]

Public prayer highlighted the official inaugural festivities as well. Chief Justice Fred Vinson, on hand to deliver the oath of office, welcomed the religious emphasis. When he had risen to the high court a few years earlier, the Kentucky Democrat had taken part in a "consecration ceremony" sponsored by a new prayer breakfast group in the Senate. There, before a gathering of more than two dozen senators and the attorney general, the chief justice of the United States testified about "the importance of the Bible being the Book of all the people and how the whole superstructure of government and jurisprudence is built upon it." Now Vinson would watch Eisenhower do the same. As the chief justice delivered the oath, the new chief executive's left hand rested not on one Bible but on two, each opened to a selection suggested by Graham. A black leather-bound family Bible was opened to 2 Chronicles 7:14, a passage Graham regularly cited to urge a national religious revival: "If my people,

which are called by my name, shall humble themselves and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." The second, a Masonic Bible used by George Washington at the first presidential inauguration, lay open to show a similar call for revival in Psalm 127: "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it; except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain."[3]

Immediately after his oath, in his first official words as president, Eisenhower asked the 125,000 Americans in attendance—and the estimated seventy million more watching live on television—to bow their heads so that he might lead them in "a little private prayer of my own" he had composed that morning. "Almighty God," Eisenhower began, "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." The president's prayer caused a minor sensation—not because of anything said in it but simply because it had been said. A half mile from the Capitol ceremonies, crowds on Pennsylvania Avenue listened to the prayer over portable speakers strewn along the streets. "There was an electric something," an observer noted, "that seemed to summon the waiting multitudes to their knees." The "inaugural prayer" was quickly reproduced in countless newspapers and magazines. An oilman from Shreveport, Louisiana, printed the prayer as a pamphlet, with the cover showing the smiling president on the left, the American flag on the right, and the cross directly above. At the bottom ran the oilman's own prayer: "God Save Our President Who Saved Our Country and Our World!"[4]

Eisenhower's prayer was only the beginning of the day's spiritual emphasis. "Religion was one of the thoughts I had been mulling over for several weeks," he later reflected. "I did not want my Inaugural Address to be a sermon, by any means; I was not a man of the cloth. But there was embedded in me from boyhood, a deep faith in the beneficence of the Almighty. I wanted, then, to make this faith clear." Accordingly, his address was rife with references to the religious beliefs of the president and the people he sought to lead to revival. "We who are free must proclaim anew our faith," Eisenhower insisted. "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." Once he finished his speech, the new president retreated to a reviewing stand to watch the inaugural parade. The five-hour procession offered several remarkable sights for the record television audience, including a trio of elephants from Ohio and a cowboy named Monte Montana who threw a lasso around the president's head as Secret Service agents glowered nearby. For many viewers, though, the most memorable part of the parade was the very first float. Anointed "God's Float" by its creators, it consisted of a replica of a house of worship with large photos of churches and synagogues arrayed along the sides. Two phrases appeared in grand Gothic script at each end: "Freedom of Worship" and "In God We Trust."[5]

The inauguration and its immediate aftermath established the tenor for Eisenhower's entire presidency. On the first Sunday in February, he became the first president ever to be baptized while in office, taking the rite before the congregation of National Presbyterian Church. That same night, Eisenhower broadcast an Oval Office address for the American Legion's "Back to God" ceremonies, urging the millions watching at home to recognize and rejoice in what the president said were the spiritual foundations of the nation. Four days later, he was the guest of honor at the first-ever National Prayer Breakfast, which soon became an annual tradition. The initial event was hosted by hotel magnate Conrad Hilton, with more than five hundred dignitaries, including several senators, representatives, cabinet members, ambassadors, and justices of the Supreme Court, taking part. Fittingly, the theme was "Government Under God." The convening pastor led a "prayer of consecration" for Eisenhower, who then offered brief remarks of his own. "The very basis of our government is: 'We hold that all men are endowed by their Creator' with certain rights," the president asserted. "In one sentence, we established that every free government is embedded soundly in a deeply-felt religious faith or it makes no sense." Eisenhower made clear that he would personally turn those words into deeds. The next day, he instituted the first-ever opening prayers at a cabinet meeting. (It took some time before this innovation became a natural habit. His secretary recalled Eisenhower emerging from a cabinet session only to exclaim: "Jesus Christ, we forgot the prayer!")[6]

All this activity took place in just the first week of February 1953. In the months and years that followed, the new president revolutionized public life in America. In the summer of 1953, Eisenhower, Vice President Richard Nixon, and members of their cabinet held a signing ceremony in the Oval Office declaring that the United States government was based on biblical principles. Meanwhile, countless executive departments, including the Pentagon, instituted prayer services of their own. The rest of the Capitol consecrated itself too. In 1954, Congress followed Eisenhower's lead, adding the phrase "under God" to the previously secular Pledge of Allegiance. A similar phrase, "In God We Trust," was added to a postage stamp for the first time in 1954 and then to paper money the next year; in 1956, it became the nation's first official motto. During the Eisenhower era Americans were told, time and time again, that the nation not only should be a Christian nation but also that it had always been one. They soon came to believe that the United States of America was "one nation under God."

And they've believed it ever since.

AT HEART, THIS BOOK SEEKS to challenge Americans' assumptions about the basic relationship between religion and politics in their nation's history. For decades now, liberals and conservatives have been locked in an intractable struggle over an ostensibly simple question: Is the United States a Christian nation? This debate, largely focused on endless parsing of the intent of the founding fathers, has ultimately generated more heat than light. Like most scholars, I believe the historical record is fairly clear about the founding generation's preference for what Thomas Jefferson memorably described as a wall of separation between church and state, a belief the founders spelled out repeatedly in public statements and private correspondence.[7] This scholarly consensus, though, has done little to shift popular opinion. If anything, the country has more tightly embraced religion in the public sphere and in political culture in recent decades. And so this book begins with a different premise. It sets aside the question of whether the founders intended America to be a Christian nation and instead asks why so many contemporary Americans came to believe that this country has been and always should be a Christian nation.

As the story of the early months of the Eisenhower administration makes clear, part of the answer—though not all of it—can be found in the mid-1950s, when Americans underwent an incredible transformation in how they understood the role of religion in public life. Other historians have paid attention to the establishment of new religious mottos and ceremonies in these years, but most have misplaced their origins. Without exception, the works on the religious revival of the Eisenhower era attribute the rise of public religion solely to the Cold War. According to this conventional wisdom, as the United States fell into an anticommunist panic, its leaders suddenly began to emphasize the nation's religious traits as a means of distinguishing it from the "godless communists" of the Soviet Union.[8]

But as this book argues, the postwar revolution in America's religious identity had its roots not in the foreign policy panic of the 1950s but rather in the domestic politics of the 1930s and early 1940s. Decades before Eisenhower's inaugural prayers, corporate titans enlisted conservative clergymen in an effort to promote new political arguments embodied in the phrase "freedom under God." As the private correspondence and public claims of the men leading this charge make clear, this new ideology was designed to defeat the state power its architects feared most—not the Soviet regime in Moscow, but Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal administration in Washington. With ample funding from major corporations, prominent industrialists, and business lobbies such as the National Association of Manufacturers and the US Chamber of Commerce in the 1930s and 1940s, these new evangelists for free enterprise promoted a vision best characterized as "Christian libertarianism."

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, this ideology had won converts including religious leaders such as Billy Graham and Abraham Vereide and conservative icons ranging from former president Herbert Hoover to future president Ronald Reagan. The new conflation of faith, freedom, and free enterprise then moved to center stage in the 1950s under Eisenhower's watch. Though his administration gave religion an unprecedented role in the public sphere, it essentially echoed and amplified the work of countless private organizations and ordinary citizens who had already been active in the same cause. Corporate leaders remained central. Leading industrialists and large business organizations bankrolled major

efforts to promote the role of religion in public life. The top advertising agency of the age, the J. Walter Thompson Company, encouraged Americans to attend churches and synagogues through an unprecedented "Religion in American Life" ad campaign. Even Hollywood got into the act, with director Cecil B. DeMille helping erect literally thousands of granite monuments to the Ten Commandments across the nation as part of a promotional campaign for his blockbuster film of the same name.

Inundated with urgent calls to embrace faith, Americans did just that. The percentage of Americans who claimed membership in a church had been fairly low across the nineteenth century, though it had slowly increased from just 16 percent in 1850 to 36 percent in 1900. In the early decades of the twentieth century the percentages plateaued, remaining at 43 percent in both 1910 and 1920, then moving up slightly to 47 percent in 1930 and 49 percent in 1940. In the decade and a half after the Second World War, however, the percentage of Americans who belonged to a church or synagogue suddenly soared, reaching 57 percent in 1950 and then peaking at 69 percent at the end of the decade, an all-time high.[9]

While this religious revival was remarkable, the almost complete lack of opposition to it was even more so. A few clergymen complained that the new public forms of faith seemed a bit superficial, but they ultimately approved of anything that encouraged church attendance. In political terms, both parties welcomed the popular new drive to link piety and patriotism; the only thing they fought over was which side deserved more credit for it. Legal scholars likewise claimed there was nothing to fear in these changes, arguing that the adoption of phrases and mottos such as "one nation under God" and "In God We Trust" did not impact America's commitment to the separation of church and state. Such acts of "ceremonial deism" were, according to Yale Law School dean Eugene Rostow, nothing but harmless ornamentation, "so conventional and uncontroversial as to be constitutional." The Supreme Court sanctioned most of these changes too. Even the outspokenly liberal Justice William O. Douglas concluded in 1952 that public invocations of faith were ironclad proof that Americans were "a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being."[10]

Nor did civil liberties organizations take a stand, at least at first. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), focused on the menace

of McCarthyism, paid little attention to the new religious rhetoric and rituals of the Eisenhower era. Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, the most significant organization of its kind, focused elsewhere as well. As suggested by its original name, still used in that era—Protestants and Other Americans United for the Separation of Church and State—the organization was worried mainly about Catholics seeking public support for parochial schools. In general, these civil liberties groups accepted the then-common claim that the First Amendment mandated the separation of church and state but not the separation of religion and politics. They believed government support for a specific sect was wrong, but support for the generically sacred was fine.

Ultimately, then, present-day assumptions of conservative Christians do rest on a foundation of fact. There once was a time during which virtually all Americans agreed that their country was a Christian nation (or, in their more expansive expressions, a "Judeo-Christian nation"). To be sure, that period of consensus was much more recent and much more short-lived than most assume, but it existed all the same. And during that brief moment this new public religiosity succeeded in writing itself—literally, in some cases—into the very identity of the nation. It transformed the national motto and the Pledge of Allegiance. It became a central part of important ceremonies of civic life and created wholly new traditions of its own. It altered the course of American politics at the highest levels and transformed how ordinary citizens understood their country. Above all, it invented a new idea about America's fundamental nature, an idea that remains ascendant to this day. Yet, for all these revolutionary developments, its story has largely been forgotten.

This book recovers an important history that has been hiding in plain sight. Phrases such as "one nation under God" and "In God We Trust"—so seemingly simple, yet actually quite complex—are etched across our lives. They are woven into the pledge of patriotism our children say each morning; they are marked on the money we carry in our wallets; they are carved into the walls of our courts and our Congress. These are everyday things, often overlooked. But at a fundamental level they speak to who we are as a people—or at least who we think we might be or should be. It's time we stop taking them for granted.

PART I

CREATION