

FORUM:
Religion and American Public Life: Presidential
Expressions of Christianity
Editors' Note

THIS forum examines the faith of four U.S. presidents, all of whom expressed conceptions of civic life derived from reformed protestant Christianity. The essays together reveal a reformed protestant orientation to government in all four men—John Quincy Adams, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Barack Obama—in which individual faith is exercised, tested, and tried in the arena of public life.

The essays also reveal important differences in the four presidents' attitudes toward religion. Facing different situations and political forces, each of the four presidents found his own way of conceptualizing and managing religion's role in politics and government. These personal approaches to religion had significant public impact. By exercising their individual understandings of faith through the presidential office, Adams, Wilson, and Roosevelt helped set forces in motion that others, including Wilson, Roosevelt, and Obama, had to negotiate.

Marking four significant moments in a religious history of the U.S. presidency, this forum begins to outline a larger arc of historical change. Adams's openness to the larger world and pride in America's new beginning as a protestant nation helped lay the groundwork for Wilson's assiduous commitment to Christian policy making. FDR's effort to commandeer Christian rhetoric for political and military ends built on some of the precedents of Wilson's religious idealism. And today, Obama's strategic use of Christian realism as a matrix for policy formation reflects his effort to manage the legacies of Wilson and FDR as well as the hostility toward those legacies expressed by his opponents.

Surveying the beliefs of four presidents together positions us to glimpse the ways in which the respective visions of civic life that they framed in Christian terms both advanced and retarded their larger agendas. A consideration of the political leadership of these four presidents suggests that the application of religious faith, reformed protestant or otherwise, to matters of governance did not lead inexorably to a consensus involving other Americans who claimed adherence to Christian denominations. The Christian realism of Obama, in as much as it is grounded in Niebuhrian ideas, has been about hard choices and political compromises. Wilson, while possessed of "a quiet conscience" that came from his efforts to "serve God" responsibly by fostering the regeneration

of society, numbered supporters who did not expect him to legislate morality. Roosevelt ran afoul of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America over his appeal to Catholics, and John Quincy Adams, sworn into office on a book of constitutional law rather than a Bible, embraced a liberal Christianity that made him and his leadership suspect to more traditionally minded Christians. These forum essays, then, while indicating something of the Christianities practiced by presidents in three centuries, likewise challenge the notion that the Christian faiths of four leaders proved the nation a univocal “Christian America.” Instead, they illustrate the manner in which leaders built complex bargains out of their negotiations between their personal faith and the exigencies of governing. Knowing something about how they identified as Christians informs us of the differences in the policies that they advanced during their terms and how policies, reciprocally, affected their faith.