

# Introduction

## I

Upon appointing Andrei Gromyko as the Soviet Ambassador to the United States, Josef Stalin urged Gromyko to attend an American church each Sunday. Why this unusual advice from the Soviet dictator, a committed atheist? Stalin informed Gromyko that listening to the sermons preached by American ministers would provide the new ambassador with unique insights into the American mindset and value system.<sup>1</sup>

American churches, Stalin believed, helped define America’s understanding of itself and its place in the world. One way to consider this book is as a test of Stalin’s conviction: how did religion influence American foreign policy in the early Cold War years?

Harry S. Truman, America’s first Cold War president, saw the conflict as nothing less than a religious war. Assessing both the nature of the foe and the need for an American response, he warned in an address at a Presbyterian Church that “the danger that threatens us in the world today is utterly and totally opposed to [spiritual values]. The international Communist movement is based on a fierce and terrible fanaticism. It denies the existence of God, and wherever it can it stamps out the worship of God. . . . God has created us and brought us to our present position of power and strength for some great purpose.”<sup>2</sup> Consider also the language of the Truman Administration’s

<sup>1</sup> This anecdote was related by Gromyko to former Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, as described by Dobrynin in his memoir *In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents, 1962–1986* (New York: Random House 1995), 22. Stalin also told Gromyko that listening to American sermons would help Gromyko improve his English skills.

<sup>2</sup> Truman, address at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, April 3, 1951. *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman, 1951* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office 1965), 210–213. Also quoted in Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (New York: Houghton Mifflin 1997), 169.

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policy directive known as NSC-68. One of the seminal manifestos of the Cold War, NSC-68 was drafted largely by State Department official Paul Nitze, under the direction of the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense, and was approved by Truman. Its importance can hardly be overstated. It articulated the strategic framework and ideological foundations for American Cold War policy, and it directed a massive increase in defense spending and all-out diplomatic and military mobilization to defeat communism. It remained classified for more than two decades, until 1975, and was intended to be read only by policy-makers at senior levels – not by the general public. Yet it reads in parts more like a sermon than a policy blueprint. These were years in which the lines between homily and strategy often blurred. NSC-68 warned that the Soviet Union “is animated by a new fanatic faith, antithetical to our own, and seeks to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world.” In contrast, America’s “fundamental purpose is to assure the integrity and vitality of our free society, which is founded upon the dignity and worth of the individual.”<sup>3</sup> That such a document was drafted by and directed at only policy-makers at the highest levels of government indicates that appeals to the American “faith” were intended not merely for marshaling – or manipulating – domestic support. They reflected the genuine convictions of many policy-makers.<sup>4</sup>

## II

How was the Cold War a “religious war”? Religion functioned in two distinct yet related ways in the great conflict: as a cause and as an instrument. As a cause, it helped determine *why* the United States opposed the Soviet Union in the Cold War. After all, in many ways it made little sense for the United States in the late 1940s, just after World War II, to step into yet another cataclysmic global conflict. The puzzle has been observed widely and studied exhaustively, and yet it persists. In the immediate aftermath of victory over the Axis powers, in a world shattered by the most catastrophic war history had ever known, in a time when the American people would seem to want nothing more than

<sup>3</sup> NSC-68, from Thomas H. Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis, eds., *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy, 1945–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press 1978), 385. For more on NSC-68, see also Ernest R. May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC-68* (Boston: Bedford Books 1993).

<sup>4</sup> See in particular Bruce Kuklick’s essay on NSC-68 in *American Cold War Strategy*, in which Kuklick compares NSC-68 to seminal civil-religious documents in American history, such as John Winthrop’s “city on a hill” sermon. “The synthesis of righteousness, pride in *patria*, and sense of the evil in other polities, as well as the belief in the spiritual potency of American ideas, places NSC-68 in a long line of similar documents.” In May, 158.

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respite and recovery, why did the United States find itself so soon after 1945 mobilizing to confront yet another foe?

There is no single reason, of course. Almost as soon as the Cold War began, scholars began debating its causes, a debate that continued unabated through the Cold War's end, and a debate that this book has no pretense of attempting to resolve. What this book *does* do is introduce a significant factor that has been almost wholly ignored in the debate: religion. Yet as much as this book will argue for the prominence of religion in determining the causes and contours of the Cold War, it by no means seeks to disregard the other factors that sparked the conflict, factors that have been elucidated by many other scholars. For one, basic security concerns played a significant part. Following World War II, the strong and growing military power of the Soviet Union, so welcome and even indispensable in the Allied victory over Nazi Germany, appeared to many Americans in a different, more malevolent light. The Soviet role in securing communist governments in several Eastern European nations only added to this sense of foreboding, as did the communist threats to governments in places such as Greece, Turkey, Iran, and China. Perhaps communist expansion would stop at the borders of central Europe, but perhaps it would not; would capitals in Paris, London, even Washington, DC, be the next to be enveloped in the Soviet sphere of influence?

Related to these security concerns was the geopolitical reality of the balance of power. It has long been a truism of international relations theory that the collection of nations that form the international system will not tolerate the emergence of one hegemonic state power. If such a nation begins to emerge – as was the case with the United States immediately after World War II, possessing unrivaled economic might, a global military presence, and a monopoly on nuclear weapons – it is almost inevitable that at least one if not several other nations will seek, together or separately, to increase their own strength as a counterweight. By virtue of its own considerable military strength and its span from Europe to the Pacific, the Soviet Union was best positioned to balance American power in the international system.

Then there were the ideological fears of many in the United States that authoritarian communism threatened democracy and free markets. Communism was inimical to both, and wherever it expanded, whether in Asia or Latin America or the Middle East or Europe, political and economic liberty necessarily would diminish. Capitalism in particular found its most formidable opponent in communism. While the contention of a previous generation of revisionist historians – that an unholy alliance of American corporate interests and political opportunists initiated the Cold War in order to secure

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access to new markets for the capitalist barons of the American empire – now seems more conspiratorial than credible, it also has at least a shadow of truth. American capitalism was threatened profoundly by communism, and American captains of industry did exert considerable influence on American foreign policy. Finally, the role of individual leaders and personality cannot be discounted. As John Lewis Gaddis and others have argued, the singular combination of aggression, paranoia, ideology, and avarice in the person of Josef Stalin made the Cold War almost inevitable.<sup>5</sup> Stalin was determined to secure as much power and territory as possible after World War II, and the only way conflict could have been averted would have been if Western leaders acquiesced to Stalin's designs. Individual leadership made a crucial difference in the United States as well. Following Franklin Roosevelt's death in 1945, had Henry Wallace become president – which came within a very few secret ballots and backroom clouds of smoke from happening during the 1944 Democratic Convention's selection of Roosevelt's running mate – Stalin would have faced an American leader with little appetite to resist Soviet expansion. But the delegates in Chicago in 1944 selected instead a Missouri haberdasher-turned-Senator, and when the United States gained Harry Truman as president following Roosevelt's death in April 1945, Stalin gained a determined opponent.

As important as each of these factors may have been in causing the Cold War – balance of power realities, security concerns, political and economic ideology, individual leadership – taken apart or even together they are still insufficient. They ignore God. And though Cold War historians may neglect the spiritual factor, Americans in the 1940s and 1950s did not. As Truman's speech to the church illustrates, many American political leaders believed that their nation had a divine calling to oppose the Soviet Union, and to reshape the world according to the divine design. This mission came in general because they perceived communism to be evil, and in particular because of communism's dogmatic atheism. It would be hard to conceive a more stark division in the world than between those nations who believed in God and those nations who outlawed such belief. Americans found it even more ominous that not only were the communists attempting to exterminate religious faith in their own orbit, but they also were seeking to spread their godless materialism around the world. Differences over political structures and economic systems and even national interests, though important in their own right, paled in comparison with the prospect of a world ruled by evil, a

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press 1997), 292–294.

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world devoid of spiritual values, a world without God. If ever there was cause to fight, this was it.

And yet how could America contend with such an enemy? The conflict certainly called for military force, as America's eventual massive mobilization demonstrated. Economic productivity, diplomacy, and ideological combat all took prominent places in the American arsenal as well. Here the second role of religion emerges. In addition to being a cause, it was an instrument in America's Cold War effort, a factor in *how* the United States fought the Soviet Union. If faith in God was as important and powerful as many Americans believed, and if communism sought to control and even extinguish religious belief, then it only followed that religion could serve as a potent tool for strengthening anticommunist resolve at home and undermining communism abroad.

The American government certainly tried to use religion in this way. Presidents Truman and Eisenhower, along with many other political and religious leaders, constantly reminded Americans of the centrality of religious faith in their national heritage, of the connection between faith in God and human rights and freedoms, of the special responsibility to which God had called America, and of communism's atheism and hostility to religion. Only by summoning the American people to a religious crusade could U.S. leaders maintain domestic support for the extraordinary measures needed to fight the Cold War. Beyond just rhetoric, this use of religion included deliberate measures to construct the institutions and rituals of a new American civil religion. Cultural Protestantism now reached out to Catholics, Jews, and others to unite against the common foe of militant irreligion.

Religion did not just serve as a Cold War instrument within the United States. The American government, led by Truman and Eisenhower, also employed religion in a number of ways – often creative and sometimes effective – to undermine communism abroad. From efforts to forge a common alliance of world religious leaders against communism, to covert funding for clergy behind the Iron Curtain, to broadcasts of sermons and other religious programming into communist nations, to calls for worldwide days of prayer “for peace” (and implicitly, against communism), the United States made religion an integral weapon in its anticommunist arsenal.

The importance of religion in the American government's Cold War policy underscores an emerging irony during these years. While religion maintained its influence in American diplomacy, American churches became less influential in shaping public culture. The American Protestant leadership probably reached the zenith of its foreign policy influence during its campaign of 1945 and 1946 to craft the postwar international order and to mobilize

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popular support for the United Nations. This only somewhat masked American Protestantism's ongoing internal conflicts, and as Cold War tensions mounted, American Protestantism degenerated into ambivalence, confusion, and sometimes bitter divisions over precisely how the United States should act in the world. Though most Protestant leaders agreed that communism was at best unpalatable, they differed on just how pernicious a threat it posed, and how and where and to what extent America should oppose it. Frustrated over these internal church squabbles, political leaders such as Truman and Eisenhower built their own pulpits in place of the clergy. They developed their own diplomatic theology and proclaimed it to their national congregation.

The American civil religion was not entirely new. Earlier versions can be found in the nineteenth century, and its roots can be traced all the way back to before the nation's founding. Yet while Eisenhower may not have invented the American civil religion, he did create a new incarnation. His chief innovation, perfecting themes developed by Truman, was combining the nineteenth century's domestic merger of "God and country" with Woodrow Wilson's belief in America's international mission. Moreover, Eisenhower institutionalized his civil religion and made it more doctrinally inclusive so that Catholics, Jews, and Mormons were welcome guests and even at times full adherents.

## III

The influence of religion on American foreign policy in the early Cold War years is just one incarnation of a longer tradition. From the earliest European settlements in North America, American leaders had long been shaped by religious convictions in developing their posture towards the rest of the world. From the Puritan John Winthrop's "City on a Hill" sermon aboard the *Arbella* to the Declaration of Independence's assertion to the world that divinely endowed rights would determine the new nation's identity, to the nineteenth century's calling of "Manifest Destiny" for the United States to extend its frontiers, America's definition of itself and its place in the world had an irreducibly religious cast. More explicitly and directly, for at least a half century before the Cold War, the religious principles and policies that would so inform American Cold War policy were already at work, as the American people heard from their leaders (political and religious) consistent appeals to God's will and even the cause of Christ in calling for interventions abroad. The late nineteenth century witnessed the widespread flourishing in the United States of the conviction that American values and Christian (read: Protestant) values were virtually one and the same. God was directing history in a linear

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progression, with America at the vanguard, and it only remained for God's people to play their parts in advancing this progress.

Some theological conservatives in the day dissented from progressivism's optimistic union of God and country. Concerned that the leaders of the largest Protestant denominations had embraced a theological liberalism that ignored or even disavowed traditional Christian tenets such as original sin, biblical authority, the need for personal redemption, the imperfectibility of human beings, and the judgment of a transcendent God, these conservatives looked askance at the focus of mainline Protestants on equating the Christian mission with reforming and even perfecting society. Nevertheless, conservatives functioned in the early decades of the twentieth century largely as fundamentalist dissenters from the sidelines and would only later begin to emerge as neo-evangelicals in the early Cold War years as a significant force shaping – instead of resisting – the broader culture. Meanwhile, the ideal of a “Christian America” initially inspired many progressive reform movements at home; it only followed in the progressive mind that since the Kingdom of God was being realized in America it should extend its ideals abroad as well.

America's very emergence as a global power – and arguably its first taste of imperialism – in 1898 stemmed in part from the clamor of many Protestant clergy for the United States to intervene in Cuba and stop Spain's oppression. “And if it be the will of Almighty God that by war the last trace of this inhumanity of man to man shall be swept away from this Western hemisphere, let it come!” thundered one Protestant journal, while another proclaimed “should we now go to war our cause will be just. Every Methodist preacher will be a recruiting officer.” If these were the sentiments emanating from houses of worship, an even more dramatic moment came in the White House itself. Following the swift defeat of Spain in Cuba, President William McKinley faced the hard choice of whether the United States should take possession of the Philippines, Spain's erstwhile colonial territory. McKinley spent an evening in prayer, and the next morning had his answer: “there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow-men for whom Christ died.” McKinley's divine revelation received a proverbial “Amen” from some in the United States Senate as well, such as Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana, who defended the American annexation of the new territories with a similar appeal: “Fellow citizens, it is a noble land that God has given us. . . . Have we no mission to perform, no duty to discharge to our fellow man? Has the Almighty Father endowed us with gifts beyond our deserts and marked us as the people of his peculiar favor,

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merely to rot in our own selfishness, as men and nations must, who take cowardice for their companion and self for their Deity? . . . William McKinley plants the flag over the islands of the seas, outposts of commerce, citadels of national security, and the march of the flag goes on!”<sup>6</sup> It is no exaggeration to say that the Spanish–American War and the American acquisition of new territories in its aftermath would not have happened the way they did – indeed, might not have happened at all – without the influence of Protestant religion.

The optimistic early years of the new century saw this vision continue to grow, in both support at home and aspirations abroad. In November 1905, several hundred church leaders representing virtually every major Protestant denomination in America gathered at Carnegie Hall in New York for the “Inter-Church Conference on Federation,” a conference on world missions that was also a precursor to the formation of the Federal Council of Churches three years later. President Theodore Roosevelt, who had just finished leading the Treaty of Portsmouth negotiations ending the Russo–Japanese War, sent a greeting highlighting a new opportunity in Japan. Roosevelt expressed his regrets at not being in attendance and assured the delegates that he had “the very highest sympathy with [your] movement . . . in addition to the great good it will do here, it is perfectly possible that the movement may have a very considerable effect in the Christianizing of Japan.” The other goals of the conference were at least as ambitious. In what could serve as the manifesto of mainline Protestantism of the day, according to the *New York Times* one conference leader described its mission as “giving impulse to all great movements that make for righteousness” and that “questions like those of marriage and divorce, Sabbath desecration, social evils, child labor, the relation of labor and capital, problems created by foreign immigration, and the moral and religious training of the young, demanded united and concerted action which the conference sought to afford.”<sup>7</sup>

The conference also heard plenary addresses from two Supreme Court Justices and several college presidents, including the president of Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson, who was the son of a Presbyterian minister. Wilson summoned the convention to the “mighty task set before us [that] welds us together. It is to make the United States a mighty Christian nation,

<sup>6</sup> Quotations from journals, McKinley, and Beveridge cited in McDougall, 112, 101–102.

<sup>7</sup> “Roosevelt Encourages Christianizing Japan; Declares the Federation of Churches Will Aid the Cause,” *New York Times*, 16 November 1905, 11. Roosevelt quote also cited in Richard M. Gamble, *The War for Righteousness: Progressive Christianity, the Great War, and the Rise of the Messianic Nation* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books 2003), 55–56.



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and to Christianize the world.” Wilson’s charge well embodied the spirit of the age. In the words of historian Richard Gamble, “the church was no longer seen as a refuge from the world, as an enclave of the redeemed within Augustine’s City of Man, but rather as a conquering army liberating the world and rebuilding the City of Man into the City of God.”<sup>8</sup>

On being elected President of the United States seven years later, Wilson could advance this vision of a new City from the most powerful pulpit in the land. While in his first term he would pursue a broad program of domestic reforms, Wilson believed that his own country was already far along on the path towards the Christian ideal. In the words of one historian, Wilson held that “the American experience witnessed the fullest manifestation of public Christian values in human history.”<sup>9</sup> Wilson in turn saw the presidency as a divine mandate to extend these values across the globe. In December 1915 he again addressed the Federal Council of Churches (FCC) and sounded a familiar theme: “we have got to save society . . . by the instrumentality of Christianity in this world.” Moreover, just as Christianity and patriotism both appealed to the same high virtues, so did America have a similar calling. Its “object in the world, its only reason for existence as a government, was to show men the paths of liberty and mutual serviceability.” Wilson elaborated on these themes in another speech the next day to a local civic group. “I believe . . . that the interests of America are coincident with the interests of the world, and that, if we can make America lead the way of example along the paths of peace and regeneration for herself, we shall enable her to lead the whole world along those paths of promise and achievement.”<sup>10</sup> Remarkably, Wilson did not deliver these hopeful speeches during a time of peace, but rather while war had already been consuming Europe for more than a year, and after Wilson had delivered two stern warnings to Germany in the aftermath of the torpedoing of the *Lusitania*, and in the midst of the growing possibility that the United States might enter the war.

In casting his vision, Wilson enjoyed considerable support from – even embodied the hopes and prayers of – many of the nation’s most prominent Protestant ministers. That same year, in *The Fight for Peace* Sidney Gulick of the FCC called for American Christians to be “ready to suffer with [Christ] in the redemption of the world, transforming it from what

<sup>8</sup> Gamble, 56–58; also includes Wilson quote.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1992), 302.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Gamble, 128–130.

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it is into what it ought to be.” Likewise in 1916, the Rev. Frederick Lynch wrote in his book *The Challenge: The Church and the New World Order* that churches needed to “preach a new patriotism, a patriotism that is not so much concerned with saving the nation as it is in having the nation be a Christ-nation to the other nations of the world” because “those who are truly Christian are anxious to have the United States become the savior of impoverished, distracted, disrupted, groaning Europe, after the war is over.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet Wilson did not maintain the support of all of the nation’s Christians, or even the most renowned Christian in his own cabinet. William Jennings Bryan, the three-time Democratic presidential nominee and Wilson’s Secretary of State, is best known to history, perhaps unfairly, for his later role as a prosecuting attorney in the 1925 trial of John Scopes for teaching evolution in a Tennessee public school. In his own day, however, Bryan was a revered populist, conservative Presbyterian, and advocate for nonviolence committed passionately to ending war. On taking office in 1913 as Secretary of State, Bryan promoted a series of bilateral treaties between the United States and eventually 30 other nations in which each committed to resolve disputes peacefully, through international arbitration. Appalled at the outbreak of war in Europe the next year, Bryan repeatedly urged Wilson to offer to mediate peace with all belligerent parties. Bryan appealed to their common faith: “the Lord never had a better opportunity or reason than now to show his power.” Wilson shared most of Bryan’s spiritual commitments and hopes for peace, but tempered those with a growing sympathy for the Allies and skepticism towards the utility of Bryan’s arbitration treaties. This initial disagreement over tactics erupted the next year into a crisis of conscience for Bryan, who feared that Wilson’s strong protests to Germany over its attacks on American ships meant an abandonment of neutrality and a march to war. Ever faithful to his higher calling, on June 8, 1915, Bryan resigned in protest. He remained loyal to his party, however, and the next year gave a stirring speech at the Democratic convention reminding delegates (and presumably President Wilson as well) that “God, in his Providence” called on the United States to apply the Golden Rule in its relations around the world, and that the Democratic party was most fit to bring world peace because it is “the party that preaches the brotherhood of man as next in importance to the fatherhood of God.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Gamble, 130–132.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Knopf 2006), 234, 251.