

Humility: The Forgotten Virtue of American Greatness

By John Lawson, Former Senior Warden

In a season when fear is a campaign tactic and “America First” is conflated with American greatness, the 75th anniversary of an event is approaching that illuminates how earlier leaders responded far differently to a much more dangerous time. The president and prime minister on whom civilization depended to defeat fascism prayed together not just for strength in war and an enduring peace after, but they asked *first* for forgiveness for our nations’ shortcomings. Such an expression of national humility from our president today would no doubt be savaged by many in this fevered political culture as just another stop on the “apology tour,” even if delivered in a prayer to God.

On New Year’s Day 1942, however, during the dark days of World War II, praying for national forgiveness was the first order of business. In dreary weather, President Franklin Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill motored from the White House to worship at historic Christ Church in neighboring Alexandria, Virginia. A master of civil religion, Roosevelt had appointed January 1 a national day of prayer, and he chose George Washington’s church to observe it.

The president and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt sat together with the prime minister in the Washington family pew, and the rector included Washington’s Prayer for the United States in the service. Celia Sandys, Churchill’s granddaughter, wrote, “It would have been hard to find a more evocative setting” than Washington’s church for the two leaders to observe the day of prayer at this moment of maximum stress.

It is not remarkable that Roosevelt and Churchill prayed together. Sharing the bond of an Anglican faith – FDR belonged to the Episcopal Church, an offspring of Churchill’s Church of England – they and hundreds of British and American servicemen had joined in a moving service the previous August on the deck of HMS *Prince of Wales* anchored off Newfoundland. To Churchill’s frustration, America had not yet entered the war, but during their clandestine rendezvous, the two leaders concluded the Atlantic Charter, a pivotal policy statement that defined the allies’ aspirations for the post-war world.

What is remarkable is what they prayed *for* when everything was on the line.

The threats that confront America today are real. But what we faced in January 1942 was *existential*, and all the news was bad. Pearl Harbor had been attacked less than a month before. The British fortress at Singapore was close to falling in what Churchill later called “the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history.” And the *Wehrmacht* had driven to within 12 miles of Moscow, threatening to take an enormous counterbalance to Hitler out of the war.

Yet another shock during this “winter of disaster” made the service at Christ Church even more poignant for Roosevelt and Churchill. On December 10, HMS *Prince of Wales*, the same new battleship on whose deck the men had worshipped, was sunk by the Japanese in the South China Sea. For the first time in history, a capital warship in the open ocean was destroyed by air power alone, exposing the vulnerability of the Royal Navy, Britain’s lifeline. Deepening the sense of loss for the two leaders, 327 of the same men with whom they had worshipped just four months before were killed.

In the face of these unrelenting blows and knowing that military fervor would be needed for the years of bloodshed and destruction ahead, the president issued a proclamation that seems surprising today. He appointed “the first day of the year 1942 as a day of prayer, of asking forgiveness for our shortcomings of the past, of consecration of the tasks of the present, of asking God’s help in days to come.” There was a precedent from another dangerous time. During the Civil War, President Lincoln signed a Senate resolution appointing a Nation Fast Day, asking citizens “to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.” A president’s asking forgiveness for the nation is what appears incongruous in our own time.

The National Day of Prayer was not about non-violence; it was years too late for that. The *New York Times* noted that, during the service, soldiers with steel helmets and fixed bayonets marched outside the wavy glass windows of the church. The rector, the Reverend Edward R. Welles II – already known for his anti-Isolationist views – fully embraced the president’s charge. In a sermon titled, “Pardon – Power – Peace,” Welles admonished his fellow countrymen for not mobilizing sooner for the war.

“We are well acquainted with the sins of other nations and we often talk about them, but we seldom think, much less speak of our own...[B]y far our greatest sin is the sin of international irresponsibility. We want our country and our people to have power and prestige,” he asserted, “but we balk at the international responsibility which those privileges impose. “Let us pray for pardon for past shortcomings; for power for the present task of achieving victory; and finally, for peace,” Welles concluded.

The service also was remarkable as a statement of peace from another war, as described by Jon Meacham in *Franklin and Winston, An Intimate Portrait of an Epic Friendship*. Before they sang the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” the rector explained that it would be the first time the southern congregation of Christ Church had sung the hymn associated with President Lincoln and northern victory. But, he said, the current world crisis meant it was time to “bury the hatchet of the War between the States.”

Rev. Welles noted afterward that as FDR, Churchill, and the congregation sang the “Battle Hymn” together, the Prime Minister, hearing it for the first time, was “so deeply moved that in the middle he wept, with great tears running unashamedly down his cheeks.” Sandys wrote that the whole congregation within the white walls of the church, including many Secret Service agents, sang movingly. Years later, Churchill selected the hymn for his own funeral, saying its inclusion was a tribute to his American mother.

In the rain, the leaders left Alexandria for Mount Vernon, ten miles down the modern parkway, to lay a wreath at the tomb of General and Mrs. Washington. That evening at the White House, they were joined by the ambassadors from the Soviet Union and China in signing the first “Declaration by the United Nations.” Amazingly, Roosevelt had persuaded the Soviets to include a commitment to religious freedom in the text. Churchill was amused when told earlier that the atheistic Soviets had accepted the provision, admiring the persuasive skills of his new American friend.

Roosevelt and Churchill faced threats to the very existence of our democracies with realism, faith, and a commitment to the wider world. Both were “world-historical figures,” known for their unstoppable wills. But when the world was at stake, they also had the humility to believe that our countries had to be worthy of the victory they were asking the Almighty to bless. In our time, when the greatness of America is the focus of intense political debate, it’s important that we remember that we still have to earn it.