

White House flubs Bible, like everyone else

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [November 29, 2011](#) issue

The White House proved itself scripturally challenged recently when Press Secretary Jay Carney said: "I believe the phrase from the Bible is, 'The Lord helps those who help themselves.'"

Actually, no.

The phrase, often attributed to the Bible, most likely comes from Benjamin Franklin and possibly from the ancient Greeks. The White House felt obligated to add a note to the transcript of Carney's briefing: "This common phrase does not appear in the Bible."

Embarrassing perhaps, but not uncommon. It may make Carney feel better to learn that he's got company—a lot of it—with other Americans. Numerous polls have shown that most Americans believe the phrase is straight from the Bible.

Christian pollster George Barna has asked Americans repeatedly about the saying and consistently found that a majority attributes it to the Bible. In 2000, 75 percent of Americans surveyed by Barna attributed the phrase to the Bible.

Comedian Jay Leno once challenged passersby to name one of the Ten Commandments for the *Tonight Show*. The most popular answer? "God helps those who help themselves."

(Another wrong guess given to Leno was, "Let whoever is without sin cast the first stone." That one's actually in the Bible—John 8:7—but even that episode with the memorable Jesus quote is bracketed in the NRSV Bible as

absent from most ancient texts of John.)

The White House flub

occurred November 2 when Carney was trying to back up his boss, who had chided Congress for passing a resolution to reaffirm "In God We Trust" as the nation's motto rather than passing his jobs bill. "I trust in God, but God wants to see us help ourselves by putting people back to work," President Obama said.

The press secretary "certainly deserves a bit of ribbing, because people attribute to the Bible all kinds of stuff," said Dale Martin, professor of religious studies at Yale University. "They should be more careful." But even Bible teachers can slip up—"everybody does it," Martin added.

So where does the idea that "the Lord helps those who help themselves" really come from?

The earliest records of a similar phrase seem to go back to the ancient Greeks. Aeschylus wrote in his play *The Persians*: "Whenever a man makes haste, God too hastens with him."

Over time, other traditions have enshrined the idea. In Islam, for example, the prophet Mohammad is believed to have said: "Trust in God but tie your camel."

The most common attribution comes from Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* in 1757. —RNS