

## War sermons

By [James P. Byrd](#)

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Along with fireworks and barbecue, the fourth of July has traditionally been an occasion for speeches that blend thanksgiving for military sacrifices with some appeal to divine favor for America. [Last year President Obama](#) continued this tradition with his speech from the White House. In it, he welcomed representatives from all branches of the military and celebrated with the United States Marine Band and country music star Brad Paisley.

After saluting individuals for their military service in Afghanistan, Obama reflected on “this generation of heroes—this 9/11 Generation that has earned its place in history alongside the greatest generations.” Military personnel, President Obama said, “represent what is best in America.” They serve “under our proud flag,” and they sacrifice all “in defense of those God-given rights that were first put to paper 236 years ago: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” President Obama closed with “God bless you. God bless your families. And God bless these United States of America.”

Such statements stir patriotic convictions partially because of their association of military sacrifices with God’s blessing. In most cases, American patriotism includes religious overtones. The reasons have a lot to do with the American Revolution. “A true patriot must be a religious man,” said Abigail Adams. Most colonists agreed—even founders such as George Washington, who were more theologically liberal than the average evangelical.

This religious influence on American revolutionaries came largely through sermons. Since the revolutionary era, Americans have commemorated the fourth of July with sermons and orations. These occasions are part of a long tradition of political sermons, which were preached on appointed days of fasting or thanksgiving in times of crisis. The influence of the sermon was never more powerful than in wartime, when communal values, social identity and unifying purpose were especially critical.

Sermons had a clear martial authority in colonial America. War, as [Jill Lepore has written](#), always involves “wounds and words.” War requires both violence and discourse—words to justify killing, words to cope with destruction, and words to give meaning to victory and defeat. In colonial America, the words that gave meaning to war were often religious words, especially words from the Bible and wartime sermons. Sermons powerfully shaped how colonial societies came to terms with their martial identities. It is no accident that New England was both the most sermon-saturated and the most militant region in colonial North America.

Even the most famous pamphlet of the war, Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, was sermon-like in its generous use of the Bible to make a plea for independence. Paine cited texts from the Old Testament to argue that God “expressly disapproves of government by kings.” Paine was no evangelical—far from it. After the revolution, he attacked Christianity and the Bible, calling the Old Testament more “the word of a demon than the Word of God.” But here he was in 1776 quoting from the Old Testament to arouse patriots to the cause. Paine knew his audience. He knew that his case for *Common Sense* had to make biblical sense.

Political sermons struck a chord in colonial America. More than that, they forged American patriotism up to the present. From that time on, the meaning of America centered on patriotism with religious overtones. Equipped with their skillful use of scripture, ministers crafted patriotic sermons around major themes of sacrifice and courage in the heat of battle. Knowing well that much of scripture included martial themes and heroic figures, preachers stressed that wartime sacrifice had spiritual significance.

It’s no wonder that George Washington wanted chaplains with him in the Continental Army. He needed them to reinforce morality and order in the ranks, but he also wanted preachers to appeal for God’s favor—because he believed fully that the fate of the revolution rested in divine providence.

Today’s Independence Day speeches do not always quote the Bible directly. But they almost always include some reference to the biblical themes that filled revolutionary-era sermons, including sacrifice, the need for courage for the fight, and even some appeal for God’s providential care for America.

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