

Trump alone

By [Benjamin J. Dueholm](#)

July 24, 2016

What the world saw in Cleveland on Thursday night, as Donald Trump accepted the Republican nomination for president, will be remembered long after the flurry of news that soon overshadowed it. The speech returned again and again to a brutally negative diagnosis of the national condition and to the brusque assurance that Trump alone can fix it, and quickly. It continually foregrounded the candidate himself—down to the visual setting, which proclaimed not a party or slogan but simply the name TRUMP, in letters visible from central Pennsylvania.

The speech was also notable for what it did not do. One absence many noted: there was literally nothing in the way of policy details. I noticed others as well. There were no allusions to the touchstone events of American history—not the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the Depression, World War II, the civil rights era, or anything else. The only reference to one of Trump's would-be predecessors was not an encomium to Washington or Lincoln or even Reagan but a jab at LBJ. There was no rhapsody about the family or the community or the church, building-blocks of a greater society. There was not even the cheapest paean to hard work, struggle, sacrifice, or ingenuity.

Instead, Trump offered an astonishingly paternalistic and infantilizing speech. It was one long list of personal promises to vanquish foes and distribute the spoils.

In other words, it was a speech utterly devoid of American civil religion. And it may be that Trump's titanic ego and apparently equivalent ignorance led him, like an idiot savant, to that most stunning innovation. We are all accustomed to political rhetoric that interweaves a noble history with flattery of the national character. It often comprises the most dutiful and forgettable parts of dutiful and forgettable speeches. President Obama is brilliant in this mode; so was Bob Dole in 1996. It can be done well. But it is a history and a flattery that is likely to land on ears cynical, ignorant, or both. I doubt that Donald Trump could tell you the dates of Washington's presidency, a gap in learning he surely shares with a great many in his audience.

Yet once you strip away the moralized context of American history and culture—not to mention any actual proposals, however far-fetched—what remains is the naked, raw appeal to fear and authoritarianism. We may not know our own history, or we may think of it as one long rigged game played in heroic garb. Still, it is not a small thing to lose even the pretense of dependence on a past, or on a community that is larger than the candidate seeking to lead it.

“I alone can fix it,” Trump said, in words that reflect, in their solipsism and grandiosity, a mood that wishes to suppress a great deal of good along with evils real and imagined. American civil religion is dead, to paraphrase Nietzsche. We have killed it.

And Trump’s speech was not just impious with respect to civil religion, that disinherited child of our national divorce. It also lacked even token appreciation for *religious* religion. Yes, the nominee thanked “the evangelical and religious community,” but only for their support for him personally. That head-pat said more than if he had ignored that “community” altogether, because it reduced white Christian conservatives to the status of a dependent interest in the Republican Party.

We are only 12 years past the theocracy panic of George W. Bush’s reelection. Even then Christian conservatives were, contrary to the dire imaginings of many secular liberals, more the tail than the dog in their party. But all the same, at the level of rhetoric and leadership the reversal is essentially complete. They are objects of patronage. Real America is now secular, bound to its pious fellow-travelers only by shared enemies.

Neither authoritarian bombast nor impiety has hurt Trump among the paladins of the old Christian right. James Dobson endorsed the candidate. R.R. Reno of *First Things* keeps finding [good things](#) to say about a candidate promising to order torture and the killing of non-combatants (even as Reno publishes a new book called, ludicrously, *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society*). Eric Metaxas, evangelical author of a popular Bonhoeffer biography, is in Trump’s corner, too.

Unlike the visibly gaunt Republican elected officials who have endorsed a man they consider patently unfit for office—on the uncertain hope that he will lose or the preposterous hope that, if elected, he will be their creature—these individuals give no indication that they know what they are doing. Trump is dangling the promise of power and protection over a cliff. Pay attention to who does and doesn’t lunge for it.