

Our Secular Fathers

“Religion and the Founders” by John Patrick Diggins, in *Partisan Review* (Summer 2001), Boston Univ., 236 Bay State Rd., Boston, Mass. 02215.

Diggins reminds us that several candidates in the 2000 American presidential election made sure to let the public know that they were running with Jesus. Asked to name his favorite philosopher, George W. Bush answered “Christ.” The reason? “He changed my heart.” Al Gore volunteered that whenever he is faced with a difficult decision, he asks himself, “What would Jesus do?” Even Joseph Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew, said that we should look for spiritual guidance to the “compassion and love of Jesus of Nazareth.” All three men put themselves squarely in the tradition of politicians who want to make a case for religion in American political culture. Diggins, a historian at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and the author of *The Proud Decades: America in War and Peace, 1941–1960* (1988), wonders whether any of them understands the real message of Christ and Christianity. Jesus urged his followers to lead lives of self-effacement, which is not exactly a characteristic we associate with politicians.

Diggins is especially suspicious of attempts by American politicians to link their religiosity to the Founding Fathers. He remarks on how absurd the delegates to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 would have found the notion of asking what Jesus would do in their place—and how fortunate it was for the country that the “Founding Fathers neither allowed Christ to influence their minds nor stopped to ask Gore’s question after the Boston Massacre of 1770, when British Redcoats slaughtered

American colonists. Had they followed the gentle Jesus and his Sermon on the Mount, they would have ‘turned the other cheek’ instead of taking up muskets.”

Diggins regrets that the public today seems too little aware of the break America’s founders made with religion when they wrote in the spirit of the Enlightenment. “Thinkers like Ben Franklin were thrilled to see nature take the place of the supernatural and science replace religion,” he notes, and John Adams said that America’s 13 colonies and their new constitutions were “founded on the natural authority of the people alone, without a pretense of miracle or mystery.” Thomas Paine, who wrote *Common Sense* (1776), was also the author of *The Age of Reason* (1794), in which he urged America to leave religion to the Middle Ages. Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence drew on the philosophy of John Locke, who thought that knowledge of God’s nature and “purposes” was beyond humanity’s reach. Alexander Hamilton and James Madison compared religious sects to political factions in their tendency to fanaticism, and they followed the skeptical David Hume in opting for a politics of “interest” rather than a politics of “zeal.” In the Lockean America where the Republic was born, the role of the state was not to carry out God’s will but simply to protect life and property. For Diggins, to allow religion an important role in politics is to deny what America meant to the individuals who wrote the foundational documents of the United States.

The Limber Side of Reagan

“Reagan and the Gorbachev Revolution: Perceiving the End of Threat” by Barbara Farnham, in *Political Science Quarterly* (Summer 2001), The Academy of Political Science, 475 Riverside Dr., Ste. 1274, New York, N.Y. 10115–1274.

Ronald Reagan assumed the presidency in 1981 with a fiercely held conviction that communism and the Soviet Union threat-

ened America. He was expected to be unyielding in his approach to dealing with the Soviet threat, and yet by the end of his