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9-12-2008

September 12, 2008: Governor Palin and Abraham Lincoln

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2008). September 12, 2008: Governor Palin and Abraham Lincoln. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/185>

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Title: Governor Palin and Abraham Lincoln

Date: 2008-09-12T07:00:00.002-04:00

9/12/2008--This has been a religion saturated Presidential campaign so far, as predicted by my book, American Religious Democracy. Unfortunately, as it has unfolded it has only hardened the secularist view that such mixing of church and state is a mistake. Governor Palin's brand of Christianity plays in a very partisan way in this context, obscuring both the easy-going religion of Senator McCain and the inclusive approach of Senator Obama. (I don't even know anything about Senator Biden's faith. Has anyone heard from him recently, by the way?)

The religious edge to the campaign ramped up a little over the "Is God with Us or are We with Him?" controversy. Governor Palin earlier had seemed earlier to say that God is on our side in the Iraq War. In her first national television interview she said that that had not been her intention. She had meant what Lincoln had once said, "Let us not pray that God is on our side in a war or any other time, but let us pray that we are on God's side.' "

Probably Lincoln's most concentrated reference to the purposes of God, and certainly his last, occurred in the Second Inaugural Address on March 4, 1865—a little over a month before his death. In the Address, Lincoln began by comparing the two sides in the Civil War:

Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

We should notice that Lincoln's God does not seem to have a side. The most one can intuit is that perhaps both sides in the war are suffering because of a great national injustice. Would we dare to say today that though our enemies are acting immorally, as Lincoln certainly was suggesting about slavery and the South, yet the judgments that come, including the terrible attacks of 9/11, are judgments for our injustice as well? Have we as a nation done enough to bring peace in the Middle East or have we instead contributed actively or by indifference to the continuation there of violence? That is the kind of question Abraham Lincoln would ask.

I doubt anybody in our current political context is really ready for Abraham Lincoln.