

Democracy, Souls, and Blood: Conceptions of America’s Civil Religion in Recent Presidential Inaugural Addresses | Samuel Kehoe | C ‘23

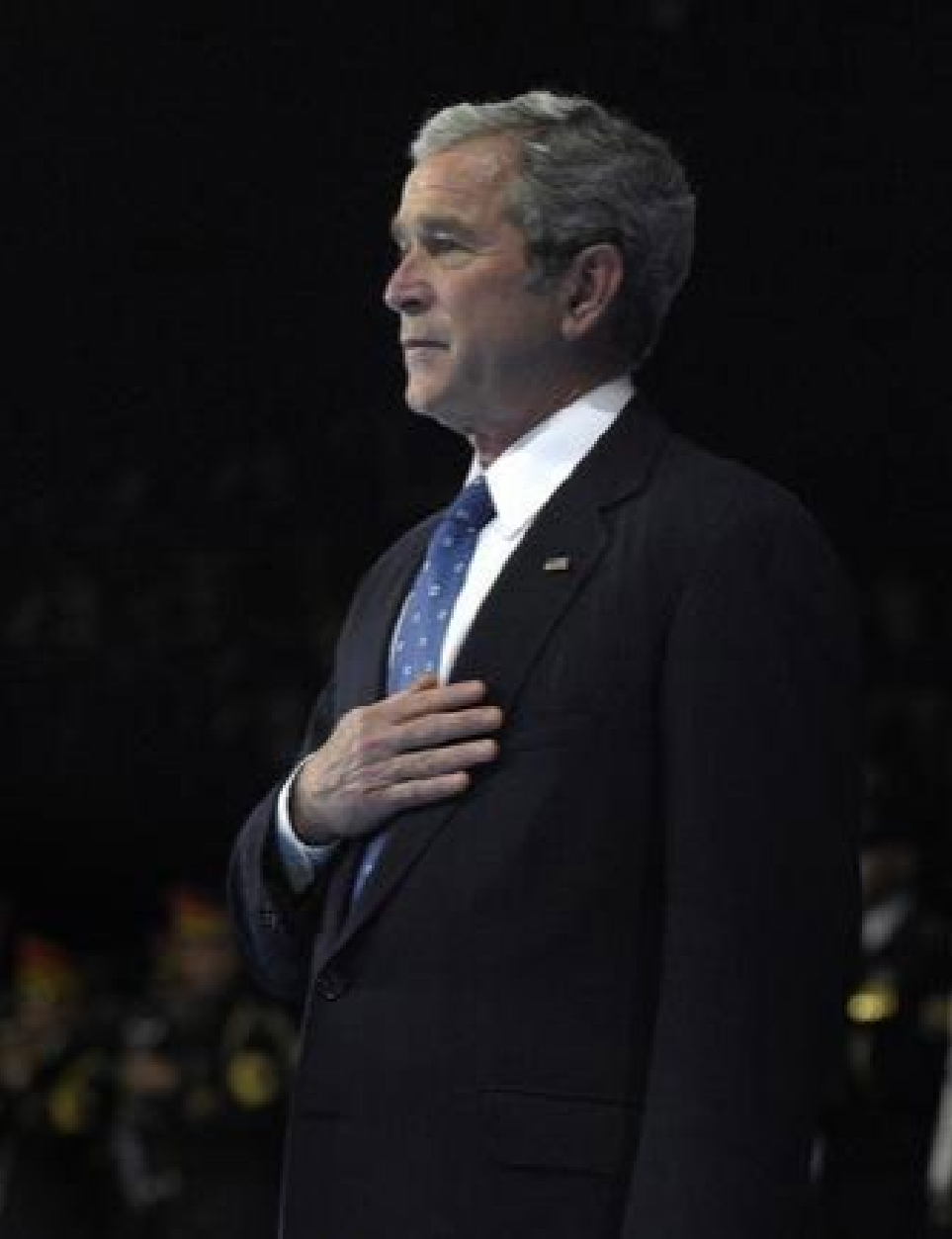
Research Background:

- Since the first European colonists settled in New England, American political theology has been a constant dialogue between deistic rationalism grounded in the European Enlightenment, republicanism, and American Protestantism.
- American Civil Religion (ACR) has historically demanded that the country be an exceptionally moral and divinely inspired society. Simultaneously, ACR cast America as a fallen and fundamentally sinful nation.
- Scholars such as Robert Bellah lamented a growing disenchantment with ACR in the 20th century due to a shift towards economic and scientific conceptions of America.
- In the 21st century, economic crises, racial reckonings, and political infighting pose additional challenges to ACR. These challenges have prompted American presidents to reframe ACR.

Research Question: How is America’s Civil Religion shifting in the 21st century? What are the implications of these shifts on the role America in the world and how Americans relate to their civic system?

Conclusion: Presidential inaugural addresses in the 21st century reveal a steady decline in the conception of America as a “city upon a hill” as evidenced by a growing discomfort with exporting American values abroad. To move beyond this disillusioned period in American history, politics must be re-enchanted with a religious passion for the country. Americans must recommit themselves to a belief in their divine obligation to craft exceptionally moral, pluralistic society. Zealous belief in such a mission is a crucial step towards actualizing it.

Analysis of 21st Century Presidential Inaugural Addresses:



GEORGE W BUSH

(Jan. 20th, 2001)

Overarching themes

- Opportunity
- American Grace
- Mutual Obligation
- Unity through shared principle
- Fundamental American Sin: Slavery

Mentions:

- Democracy: 2x
- Divine Imagery: 4x

Stated intention to project American values such as freedom internationally

BARACK OBAMA

(Jan. 20th, 2009)

Overarching themes

- Equality
- Interdependence
- Charity
- Fundamental American Sin: Inequality

Mentions:

- Democracy: 2x
- Divine Imagery: 7x

Stated intention to project American democracy through international alliances and institutions

DONALD TRUMP

(Jan. 20th, 2017)

Overarching themes

- The People vs. the Political Elites
- Unity through loyalty
- Patriotic Nationalism
- Fundamental American Sin: Elitism

Mentions:

- Democracy: 0x
- Divine Imagery: 5x

Stated intention to seek friendship without projecting a particular way of life abroad

JOE BIDEN

(Jan. 20th, 2021)

Overarching themes

- Civility
- Grace/Forgiveness
- Democracy
- Fundamental American Sin: Disunity

Mentions:

- Democracy: 11x
- Divine Imagery: 11x

Stated hope to make America a beacon of good abroad