

# The Presidency: Why Do They Seek It?

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## Forum



LINCOLN

freedom of religion. He also prized being known as the founder of the University of Virginia.

Every president concludes his oath of office with the words "So help me, God." There is nothing in the Constitution that makes this mandatory — in fact, it goes the other direction. There can be no religious test put to exclude any man from seeking the presidency.

The presidents are doing what they feel they should, or at least what most Americans feel they should, in including this language in the oath. But there is no clear-cut evidence that any president ever exploited religion to curry the favor of religionists, although they may have been accused of it.

There is much to be said about there being no atheists in the foxholes of war. As the job becomes more awesome, Americans might better pray that there is never one in the White House.

The very nature of the office has brought to every one of our presidents — successful or unsuccessful — an awesome realization that it is not human resources and human wisdom that make him adequate for the task. "So help me, God" was never intended as idle words.

When John McMaster, the historian, was a boy he was taken to a reception at the White House. The guests were lined up and then led past the President under the careful scrutiny of the ushers. None of the guests was allowed to come very close to the President.

There was one old man who had traveled a long distance to attend and he was disappointed at not being able to shake the President's hand.

Just before he left, the old man waved his hat at the President and shouted: "Mr. President, I'm from New York State where we believe God Almighty and Abraham Lincoln are going to save the country."

Jovially, Lincoln waved back.

"My friend, you're half right."

There is a strange intermingling of the human and the

divine that comes to the fore when the presidency is taken into consideration. Even men such as William Henry Harrison or Grant or Taft or Harding and a couple of others who were not really strongly religious, at one time or another acknowledged that they had to rely on God in carrying out the demands of the office.

True, a few of them seemed to have forgotten momentarily and exchanged places, but in the long run they felt they knew who really was The Boss. There seems to have been at least a tacit understanding of Romans 13, that all authority and power to rule over men — no matter by what means it is obtained — is derivative in nature. From the very hand of God.

With so many men now vying for the presidency and President Carter seeking re-election, one readily wonders what it is that drives a man to want to be president in the first place. The man who has the most sterling character doesn't come out of the job unscathed. It is the road to glory — at least as man strives to attain glory — but that road becomes paved with calumny the longer he walks it and the more troubled the times are through which that road passes.

Lincoln once was asked if he didn't find the presidency rather difficult and even boring at times — a lot less glamorous than popular thinking makes it.

"Yes, sometimes. In fact, I feel sometimes like a man who was ridden out of town on a rail and said: 'If it wasn't for the honor of the occasion, I'd rather walk.'"

Eight didn't get to walk. Four were assassinated; there were attempts on three others. Four others died of natural causes while in office.

Yet there seems to be only one president who deliberately downplayed the importance of the office. Thomas Jefferson. When he wrote his epitaph, he made no mention of having been president. He preferred to be known as the author of the Declaration of Independence and Virginia's law guaranteeing



CARTER

REAGAN

## Lives Marked By Suffering

The letter told me of a death, a nervous breakdown, and some other difficulties in a family which has been close to my own throughout my life.

As I think back over the years, I am bewildered by the number and severity of the hardships, the tragedies this family has experienced.

If difficulties of this kind were distributed purely by chance, it would be impossible that one family could encounter so many.

In their own family life, these people echo that in-

credible series of tragedies which are a public part of the Kennedy family: the oldest Kennedy son dead in the war, a daughter retarded, two sons assassinated, a grandson requiring a leg amputation. It just doesn't seem to end.

And any effort to give a religious explanation makes God and the system of religious thought seem terribly cruel and capricious.

Lord knows, I would not try to offer Rose Kennedy any kind of explanation for all the suffering she has shared with her family. Nor

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Reedy



Looking for the Lord

do I attempt such an explanation with these friends of mine.

But one thing I have noticed in my personal association with people who have been afflicted with more than their share of trouble: Either tragedy comes to those who have exceptional human qualities — or the experience itself makes them exceptional in their strength and depth of character.

Literature is filled with stories of disasters which are too much for those involved. In literature, such people often break under the burden. They collapse mentally or emotionally; they become bitter and withdraw from all human involvement; some seek escape in suicide.

Perhaps such things do happen in real life, but I haven't encountered them as a result of this kind of suffering.

On the contrary, I've seen an amazing strength in enduring the pain, a deepening of compassion and humanity, an enrichment of faith and trust in God.

from the grave. The experience of death and the return to life gave him a different perspective on everything that later occurred.

It may be that, through God's providence, such difficulties come only to those who can cope with them. On the other hand, it may be that many of us have reserves of goodness and faith of which we are unaware. Without such test, we don't realize how much we can endure.

Years ago, I read a story built around Lazarus after Jesus called him from the tomb. I don't remember the details, but the theme was how totally different Lazarus was after his return

Something similar seems to take place in these people who live through extraordinary pain in their lives. They seem different, more at peace. They seem less bothered by ordinary annoyances, and more sensitive to the sufferings of others.

In some way, they seem more mature as human beings, often more mature as religious people. They seem to have experienced a relationship with God not shared by those of us who have not gone through such trials.

## Looking Back . . .

From the pages of the Courier-Journal:

75 years ago this week — Under items of interest on the front page: "Very low colonist rates to the Pacific Coast via the Nickel Plate Road. \$42.50 Buffalo to principal California and North Pacific Coast points."

As always in those days of 75 years ago, a different perspective can be found from these "Victorian" times. Witness: "Beauty Exercises — Face skinning restores complexion and removes wrinkles — an advantage over face steaming." That was the over-long headline. The story opens: "According to physical culture oracles, one can be beautiful if one wants to be. One can exercise and become straight and pretty."

Now, that all may have been well and good back in 1905 but in these days, hmmm! A full column followed, all devoted to beauty care, including a subheaded article, "The girls with sallow complexion will do well to eat oranges. Not one orange alone at breakfast time but four or five each day. This works wonders."

And if your sense of time is already confused, try this 1905 editorial: "What is this country coming to,

anyway? High living, greed for wealth, breaking down of old traditions, exultation of the doctrine of free love don't tend to improve the ethics and morals of the people."

Things never change. The next editorial took to task one Theodore Schroeder of Salt Lake City who is reported to have said: "Laws should be passed making it permissible to prevent motherhood if economic conditions make a livelihood for the child exceedingly doubtful."

The dark ages live on!

50 years ago — Page 1 banner headline — "Practical suggestions made for reform of state prisons by Elmira Chaplain." Then subheads: "Rev. Francis J. Lane Advises That Prisons Be of Four Classes, Says First Offenders Should Be Kept in One Prison, Second Offenders in Another, Third Offenders in Another, and All Hardened Criminals in the Fourth Class, He Recommends That Shorter Terms Be Given All First-Time Offenders."

Father Lane was Catholic chaplain at Elmira Reformatory and made his proposal in a talk to the Elmira Kiwanis Club.

In those days, it apparently was not stylish to hide

one's light under a bushel. This story on a Mercy High School rummage sale: "The Mercy High School, conducted by the Sisters of Mercy, is one of Rochester's newest high schools for girls. It is a splendid school, superbly located, well conducted and a credit to the City of Rochester and to the Diocese."

25 years ago — "Bishop Cyril C. Cowderoy of Southwark, England, visited Rochester, to thank clergy and people for their generous aid in building St. John Fisher Church in Rochester, England." This diocese contributed \$30,000 for the erection of the church honoring the 16th Century martyr.

Now inside — one prelate and three laymen were honored with Scouting's Pelican Award — Msgr. Joseph E. Vogt, chaplain at Industry; William O'Mara of Hornell, Richard T. Toole and Charles A. Bragg, both of Rochester.

Nostalgia still not trapping? Try this: The Cafe Lorenzo on Chestnut Street was advertising a "7-course Shore Dinner at \$2.90." It included a whole broiled lobster tail, drawn butter; broiled fresh whitefish, lemon butter; lobster saute newburgh in casserole; fresh jumbo shrimp newburgh on patty shell. And a "non-fattening" spaghetti with lobster or tuna fish sauce.

Those were the days!