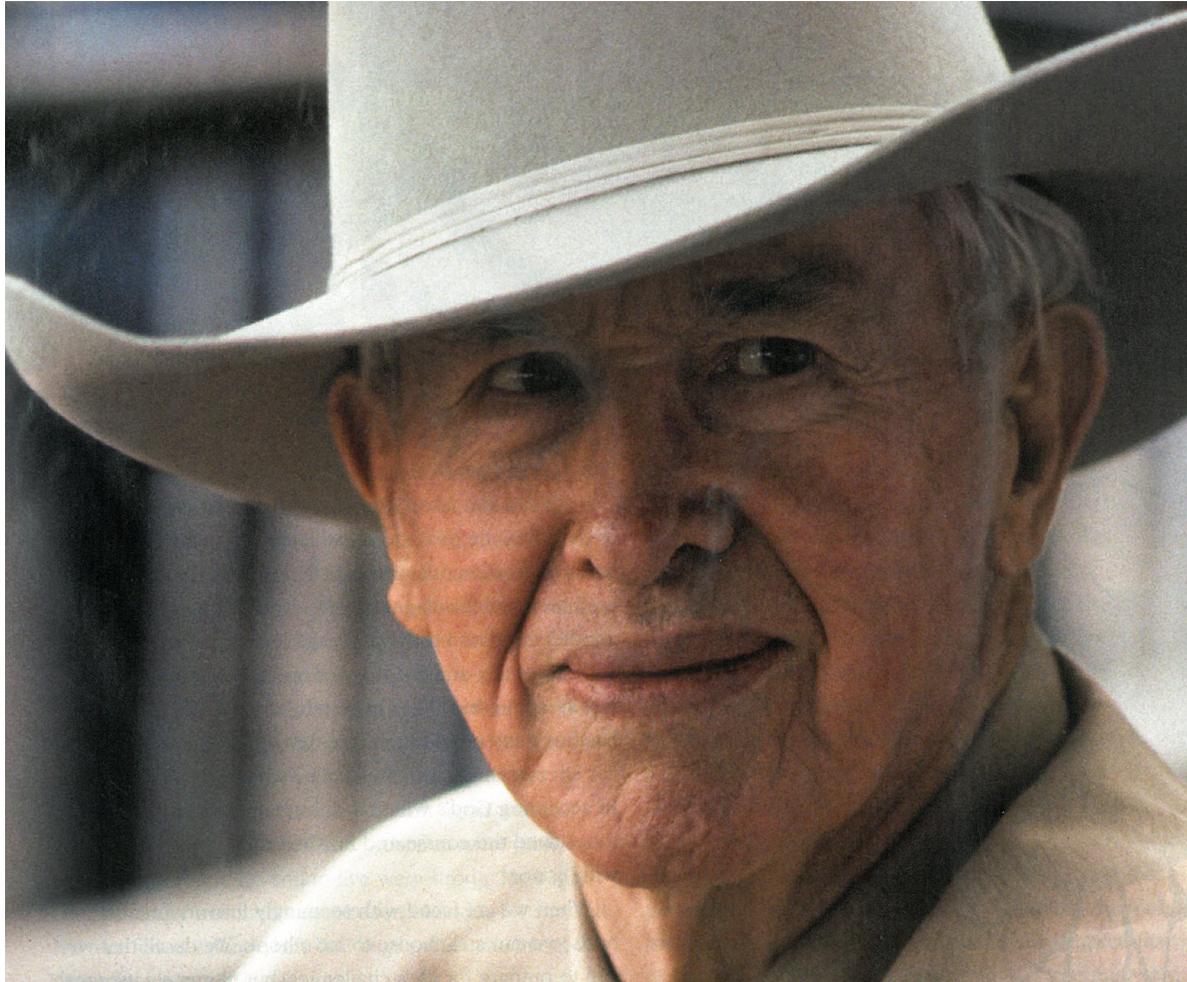


God's Hand in our Nation's History, by Ezra Taft Benson

(Taken from [Ezra Taft Benson's speech at BYU](#), edited slightly to take away specific religious content).

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For thirty-three years I have had the honor and privilege of coming here and enjoying communicating with the students, speaking to them. I have had a fear that sooner or later you would place me in the embarrassing position that an old lady placed a railroad conductor in up in Boise, Idaho. This good woman had never had a ride on a train. Her family were all married and she was on a little, rocky farm, all alone. She wanted to have a ride on a train before she passed on. Her children also wanted her to have that experience, and so it was decided she would take a trip to a distant town and visit some relatives during the holidays. When the time arrived, she came down to Boise all aflutter with excitement. When the train pulled in, her excitement increased. Soon the conductor waved his hand and called, "All aboard." The old lady got on the train and took her seat. Then the conductor came down the aisle picking up tickets, and she said, "Conductor, I

don't know much about railway trains. Now, I knew what you meant when you called, 'All aboard,' but I didn't know what you meant when you waved your hand."

The conductor, a rather rough sort of fellow, said, "Oh, that was just my signal for the engineer to get the h— out of here." It answered her question, but she didn't like it, and as the conductor went on picking up tickets his conscience began to smite him. He thought that was not a very gentlemanly way to speak to a lovely old lady. So when he finished the car, he went back and began to apologize, but she just waved her hand.

Sooner or later I fear this may happen to me if I keep coming to BYU, but I hope it isn't tonight.

Seriously, I am very, very happy to be here. I appreciate the kind words of introduction by President Fox, this choice music, and this lovely patriotic number by my lovely daughter.

Now to come here, and to look into your faces and realize something of your quality, your opportunities, your background, is an inspiration.

I come to you tonight with a message that has lain close to my heart for a number of years. Because of the nature of it I have committed most of it to writing. Tonight I will speak to you about our beloved republic and the inspired agents whom God raised up to establish the foundation upon which our liberty rests. I will speak to you also about some mischief that has been afoot for a number of years, a mischief that intends to undermine our republic, its founders, and America's Churches.

Prophecies About America's Destiny

The destiny of America was divinely decreed. The events which established our great nation were foreknown to God and revealed to prophets of old. As in an enacted drama, the players who came on the scene were rehearsed and selected for their parts. Their talents, abilities, capacities, and weaknesses were known before they were born.

As one looks back upon what we call our history, there is a telling theme which recurs again and again in this drama. It is that God governs in the affairs of this nation. As the late J. Reuben Clark, Jr., has said, "This is the great motive which runs through our whole history."

A statement which Harold B. Lee was fond of quoting was this: "The frequent recurrence to fundamentals is essential to perpetuity."

As one who is vitally concerned about the perpetuity of our liberties, our freedoms, and the principles laid down by the founders of this country, I refer to some fundamentals with which most of you are familiar.

Inaccuracies of Secular History

No man, however brilliant and perceptive, shall have a complete perspective of our nation's history without a correct understanding and conviction. He must be persuaded by God's truth if he is to obtain a true and complete picture of our nation's origin and destiny. Secular scholarship, though useful, provides an incomplete and sometimes inaccurate view of our history. The real story of America is one which shows the hand of God in our nation's beginning.

Why is it that this view of our history is almost lost in classrooms in America? Why is it that one must turn to the writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to find this view implied or stated? The answer may, perhaps, be found in Abraham Lincoln's proclamation:

We have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined in the deceitfulness of our hearts that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God who made us. ["A Proclamation by the President of the United States of America," 30 March 1863]

As a nation we have become self-sufficient. This has given birth to a new religion in America which some have called secularism. This is a view of life without the idea that God is in the picture or that He had anything to do with the picture in the first place. In the first century of our nation's history, the university was the guardian and the preserver of faith in God. In this present century, the university has become ethically neutral, by and large, agnostic. Our country is now reaping the effects of this agnostic influence. It has cost us an inestimable price. For who can place the price on the worth of a human soul or the cost of the cynicism that many young people have toward our republic and its leaders?

I would have you consider soberly how this secular influence has affected the treatment of our nation's history in the textbook in the classroom. Today, students are subjected in their textbooks and classroom lectures to a subtle propaganda that there is a "natural" or a rational explanation to all causes and events. Such a position removes the need for a faith in God, or belief in His interposition in the affairs of men. Events are *only*—and I stress that—*only* explained from a humanistic frame of reference. At least that's what they say.

Historians and educational writers who are responsible for this movement are classified as "revisionists." Their purpose has been and is to create a "new history." By their own admission, they are more influenced by their own training and other humanistic and scientific disciplines than any religious conviction. This detachment provides them, they say, with an objectivity that the older historians did not have. Many of the older historians, I should point out, were defenders of the patriots and their noble efforts. Feeling no obligation to perpetuate the ideals of the founding fathers, some of the so-called "new historians" have recast a new body of beliefs for their secular faith. Their efforts, in some cases, have resulted in a new interpretation of our nation's history.

Secular Reinterpretations of American History

May I illustrate a few of these reinterpretations: First, that the American victory in the War of Independence, they say, was only the result of good fortune, ineptitude by the British generals, and the entrance of France into the war. All these facts are evident, but what is significantly left out are additional explanations which could provide the student with a spiritual perspective of our history.

Why is it we do not read in our history of explanations such as this from George Washington? "The success which has hitherto attended our united efforts, we owe to the gracious interposition of heaven, and to that interposition let us gratefully ascribe the praise of victory and the blessings of peace."

Our second reinterpretation is that the political thought of the founding fathers was the result of borrowed ideas from the eighteenth-century philosophers. Again, it is evident that the founders were men well schooled in the political thought of their times as well as of ancient civilizations, but how does one account for the unity which came out of the impasse among the delegates at the Constitutional Convention? It was at this point that Benjamin Franklin made his great speech. He solemnly counseled:

I have lived, sir, a long time, and the longer I live the more convincing proofs I see of this truth: that God governs in the affairs of man. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid?

We have been assured, sir, in the sacred writings that “except the Lord build the house they labor in vain that build it.” I firmly believe this. And I also believe that without his concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel. We shall be divided by our little, partial, local interest. Our projects will be confounded, and we, ourselves, shall become a reproach and a byword to future ages; and what is worse, mankind may hereafter from this unfortunate instance despair of establishing governments by human wisdom and leave it to chance, war, and conquest.

I therefore make the move that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of heaven and its blessings on our deliberations be held in this assembly every morning before we proceed to business and that one or more of the clergy in this city be requested to officiate in that service.

Some historians have ignored this dimension because Madison, who reported the Constitutional Convention, said nothing about it. Others report that the motion was not acted on. Another member of the convention, Jonathan Dayton of New Jersey, who also reported it, said the motion was acted on favorably by the convention.

Again, I would ask: Why is it that the references to God’s influence in the noble efforts of the founders of our republic are not mentioned? Listen to the convictions of two of these delegates to the Constitutional Convention. First, Charles Pinckney:

“When the great work was done and published, I was struck with amazement. Nothing less than the superintending hand of Providence that so miraculously carried us through the war . . . could have brought it about so complete upon the whole.”

Here is another testimony, this from James Madison, sometimes referred to as the “Father of the Constitution”:

“It is impossible for the man of pious reflection not to perceive in it a finger of that Almighty hand which has been so frequently and signally extended to our relief in the critical stages of the revolution.”

Third, the charge has been made that the founders designed the Constitution primarily to benefit themselves and their “class” (property owners) financially and that the economic motive was their dominant incentive. Such was the thesis of the American historian, Dr. Charles Beard. Yet Madison said: “There was never an assembly of men . . . who were more pure in their motives.” We must remember that these were men who had pledged in many cases their fortunes and their sacred honor.

Shortly after the turn of this century, Charles Beard published his work, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*. This book marked the beginning of a trend to defame the motives and integrity of the founders of the Constitution. It also grossly distorted the real intent of the founders by suggesting their motivation was determined by economics—a thesis which had originated with Karl Marx. Beard himself was not a Marxist, but he was socialist in his thinking, and he admitted there was much we could learn from Marx’s ideas. Before his death, Beard recanted his own thesis, but the damage had been done. This began a new trend in educational and intellectual circles in the United States.

Intellectual Trends Defaming the Founding Fathers

Not infrequently this penchant for historical criticism has resulted in the defamation of character of the founding fathers. It is done under the guise of removing the so-called “myths” that surround their background. A favorite target of this defamation has been George Washington, our nation’s most illustrious leader. Some of these so-called “new” historians have questioned his honesty, challenged his military leadership and executive ability, and impuned his moral character.

Others who have taken measure of the man have assessed matters differently. John Lord, author of a well-known work of the nineteenth century, *Beacon Lights of History*, wrote this of Washington:

Washington . . . had . . . a transcendent character. . . . As a man he had his faults, but they were so few, and so small, that they seemed to be but spots upon a sun. These have been forgotten, and as the ages roll on, mankind will see naught but the lustre of his virtues of the greatness of his services. [Beacon Lights of History (New York: Fords, Howard, and Hulbert, 1884), 7:168]

Winston Churchill also estimated Washington thus:

George Washington holds one of the proudest titles that history can bestow. He was the Father of his Nation. Almost alone his staunchness in the War of Independence held the American colonies to their united purpose. . . . He filled his office with dignity and inspired his administration with much of his own wisdom. To his terms as President are due the smooth organization of the Federation Government, the establishment of national credit, and the foundation of foreign policy. [A History of the English Speaking People: The Age of Revolution (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1962), p. 347]

General William Wilbur, author of the commendable little volume entitled *The Making of George Washington*, which I commend to all, made this appraisal of Washington:

. . . greatness of moral character, forthright honesty, quiet modesty, thoughtful consideration of others, integrity, thoroughness, kindness and generosity.

During the American Revolution and for more than fifty years thereafter, young Americans were inspired to attain these qualities by the vivid recollection of men who had served with George Washington—men who knew him from intimate daily association. As years went by, books, stories, and living personal memories all combined to present this great hero in such a way as to make him an inspiring and potent influence for good.

Unfortunately, the last seventy-five years have produced a marked change. In these years it has come to be standard practice for Washington authors to proclaim it as their purpose to “humanize” the Washington image. Most of them have instead succeeded in belittling him. They have replaced a glorious, inspiring memory with a tawdry, warped picture. [The Making of George Washington, pp. 19, 20, 21]

And lest these testimonies are not convincing, President Wilford Woodruff said of the founders collectively, and of Washington specifically, the following:

I am going to bear my testimony to this assembly, if I never do it again in my life, that those men who laid the foundation of this American government . . . were the best spirits the God of heaven could find on the face of the earth. These were choice spirits, not wicked men. General Washington and all of the men that labored for the purpose were inspired of the Lord

When one casts doubt about the character of these noble sons of God, I believe he or she will have to answer to the God of heaven for it. Yes, with Lincoln I say, “To add

brightness to the sun or glory to the name of Washington is . . . impossible. Let none attempt it. In solemn awe pronounce the name, and in its naked deathless splendor leave it shining on.” That is the charge I would leave to people everywhere, faculty, students, others of this and every other university—leave Washington’s name “shining on.”

May no teacher, in the name of scholarship, attempt to blemish Washington’s illustrious character.

If ever this country needed the timeless wisdom of the Father of our Country, it is today. How much our country could benefit by following the wisdom of our country’s first president. Here are a few among many of his maxims:

Let the reigns of government then be braced and held with a steady hand and every violation of the Constitution be reprehended: if defective, let it be amended, but not suffered to be trampled upon whilst it has an existence.

*To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace.
The love of my country will be the ruling influence of my conduct.*

A good moral character is the first essential in a man. . . . It is therefore highly important that you should endeavor not only to be learned, but virtuous.

Let us unite, therefore, in imploring the Supreme Ruler of nations to spread his holy protection over these United States: to turn the machinations of the wicked to confirming of our constitution: to enable us all at times to root out internal sedition and put invasion to flight: to perpetuate to our country that prosperity which his goodness has already conferred, and to verify the anticipation of this government being a safeguard to human rights.

It would profit all of us as citizens to read again Washington’s Farewell Address to his countrymen. The address is prophetic. I believe it ranks alongside the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

My feeling about this tendency to discredit our founding fathers was well summarized by the late President J. Reuben Clark, Jr., in these words:

These were the horse and buggy days, as they have been called in derision. These were the men who traveled in the horsedrawn buggies and on horseback; but these were the men who carried under their hats, as they rode in their buggies and on their horses, a political wisdom garnered from the ages. As giants to pygmies are they when placed along side our political emigres and their fellow travelers of today who now traduce them with slighting words and contemptuous phrase. [Stand Fast by Our Constitution, pp. 136–37]

Current American Self-Criticism

Today we are almost engulfed by this tide of self-criticism, depreciation, and defamation of those who served our country honorably and with distinction. A most recent victim of the tarnish brush is J. Edgar Hoover. I knew J. Edgar Hoover personally over many years. He was a God-fearing man and one of the most honorable and able men I have ever known in government service. By innuendo, lesser men, whose own motives are questionable, have maligned his motives and good character.

I know the philosophy behind this practice—“to tell it as it is.” All too often those who subscribe to this philosophy are not hampered by too many facts. When will we awaken to the fact that the defamation of our dead heroes only serves to undermine faith in the principles for which they stood, and the institutions which they established? Some have termed this practice as “historical realism” or moderately call it “debunking.” I call it slander and defamation. I repeat, those who are guilty of it in their writing or teaching will answer to a higher tribunal.

It should not, therefore, cause us to be astonished when other nations view the United States as a “faltering democracy.” How long would a basketball team, ranked number one in the polls, remain in that position if the studentbody, the school paper, and supporting faculty constantly pointed out its weaknesses? Soon the team would begin to lack confidence and fail. This is what we have been doing in our blessed country. Our heroes and institutions have been tarnished. We are constantly being reminded of what is wrong in our country, via the press and other media. A recent editorial in the *London Daily Telegraph* appealed to us:

The United States should know that her European cousins and allies are appalled and disgusted at the present open disarray of her public life. The self-criticism and self-destructive tendencies are running mad with no countervailing force in sight. . . . Please America, for God’s sake, pull yourself together.

It is the job of the historian and educator and church leader to help us as a nation to “pull ourselves together,” to help us regain perspective and vision and the respect of all nations. This will not be done by showing that this is merely a phase through which we are passing. No, it will be done by men who possess a love of country, a vision of our country’s future, and the assurance of her divinely guided destiny.

The Profession of History

Tonight I have spoken plainly to you. Lest there be some who get the impression that I am an antagonist to the discipline of history and historians, let me declare my feelings about that noble profession. I love to read history and historical biography. I have great respect for the historian who can put into proper perspective events and people and make history come alive. I believe the maxim that “those who do not understand the lessons of the past are doomed to repeat those errors anew.” I love history books that tell history as it was—with God in the picture, guiding and directing the affairs of the righteous. I love to read history for its timeless lessons and the inspiration I can gather from the lives of great leaders.

I suppose there will be some who will suggest that a fireside is neither the time nor the place for these kinds of remarks, that they would be better confined to the closed door of a faculty forum.

My purpose this evening is to help you to discern a trend that has been destructive to the faith of many of our people in our nation’s founders and our country’s divine origin and destiny.

My plea to you tonight is to stir up the gift that is within you. Those gifts of the Spirit are needed to discern truth from error.

It is now my privilege to bear my testimony to you concerning the matters we have been discussing this evening.

I bear witness to you that America’s history was foreknown to God; that His divine intervention and merciful providence have given us both peace and prosperity in this beloved land; that through His omniscience and benevolent design, He selected and sent some of His choicest spirits to lay the foundation of our government. These men were inspired of God to do the work which they accomplished. They were not evil men. Their work was a prologue. It was done in fulfillment of the ancient prophets who

declared that this was a promised land, “a land of liberty unto the Gentiles,” and that is us.

I testify to all of you—young and old—that God, our Heavenly Father, and His Son Jesus Christ have visited this land. This is the kingdom which Daniel of old saw in vision—a kingdom “which shall never be destroyed: and . . . shall not be left to other people” (Daniel 2:44).

Yes, you young people are privileged to live in this choice land—a land of Zion—a land reserved for the second coming of our Lord and Savior, and the Lord’s base of operations today. When all these events are finished and written, we will look back and not be astonished to see that the prophecies, ancient and modern, about this land and these events were but our history in reverse. For that is what prophecy is.

May God bless us all to be faithful and true to this vision and to uphold, sustain, and defend this nation, its founders, and the kingdom of God, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.