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# God and Man in the White House: Implications for Going to War

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**Abstract.** This article highlights pertinent psychological research on the relationship between a national leader's religious beliefs and that leader's decision making on going to war.

Much has been made about the United States (US) President's religious beliefs in the popular press (e.g., Bumiller, 2003). On a personal level, they have been implicated in his apparent transcendence of an alcohol problem and a transformation of daily living, life style, and private meaning. On a professional level, they have been implicated in his development of a strategic worldview and decisions on war and peace. To the latter, Bumiller's citation of the President's chief of staff commenting on the president spending 10 minutes alone to pray before a recent press conference focused on Iraq and war is a case in point.

From the perspective of a formally secular nation-state's government, should one prefer a leader with strong or weak religious beliefs? With beliefs coloring all of life versus those that seem to be compartmented into the personal and away from the professional--assuming this is even possible?

A number of facile observations may come quickly to mind. Religious ideology has fueled wars and extinguished them; led to atrocities and prevented them; can be associated with common decency or indecency in personal behavior within a formal seat of power; may suggest flexibility or dogmatism on political principle, strategy, and tactics. In fact, a former US President, Jimmy Carter (2003), and the current President are poles apart on the justness of a preemptive war against Iraq even as they may be very close in the centrality of their religion to their lives.

What else might be said based on psychological research? Rosenberg (1986) has argued that US Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and Johnson shared a belief that "the principles that should guide human behavior are not man-made, but rather are dictated by God." US President Kennedy, on the other hand, may not have harbored such centrality towards religious beliefs. Kennedy's orientation may have contributed to more flexibility in the development of policy and a lessened likelihood to launch political crusades.

Perr (1992), in an analysis of a forensic psychiatric case in Canada, has elucidated circumstances wherein an individual could become a national leader even with serious psychopathology. Here, publicly professed and privately held religiosity both may serve to mask psychopathology from becoming apparent to the general public and may be fueled by it. The upshot can be significant political support for the problematic decision making of a seriously disturbed individual.

Pant (1976) has argued that similarity in religious belief between leaders and followers reinforces the leadership-follower relationship. A reasonable association to this argument is that the reinforcement may impede serious analysis of problematic decision making from co-religionists.

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Wach (1944) is just one of many researchers who has commented on religious, charismatic leadership. A common negative feature of such leadership is the difficulty in maintaining critical thinking concerning policy deliberations, pronouncements, and evaluation.

Benson and Williams (1982) argued for a typology of 6 religious ideologies and hypothetical linkages to aspects of the public policy process. However, as with much of the above, there is a focus on the content of religious belief as opposed to the function and process of religious thought leading to belief that makes interpretation of relationships tenuous.

Cohen and Rozin (2001) have argued that Protestants may believe that beliefs are more controllable and that sinful beliefs are more sinful (even if not acted upon) than some other religionists. Such a perspective might have implications for what one might allow oneself to consciously entertain in the way of policy options for oneself or for whom one represents.

Back to President Bush and war with Iraq. He may believe that God is on his side, that God's side is the side to be on, that there is no side of God, or many other combinations and permutations. Suffice it to say that, even as the mother of all crusaders, he may still act in a manner that cannot be easily predicted. (See Benson, P. L., & Williams, D. L. (1982). *Religion on Capitol Hill: Myths and realities*. Oxford University Press; Bumiller, E. (March 9, 2003). Aides say Bush girds for war in solitude, but not in doubt. *The New York Times*, p. 1, 2; Carter, J. March 9, 2003). Just war-or a just war? *The New York Times*, p. 13; Cohen, A.B., & Rozin, P. (2001). Religion and the morality of mentality. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 81, 697-710; Pant, N. (1976). The recruitment of leaders: A study of citizens and neighborhood leaders. *Journal of Social & Economic Studies*, 4, 249-261; Perr, I.N. (1992). The trial of Louis Riel: A study in Canadian psychiatry. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 37, 845-852; Rosenberg, P.J. (1986). Presidential beliefs and foreign policy decision-making: Continuity during the Cold War era. *Political Psychology*, 7, 733-751; Wach, J. (1944). *Sociology of religion*. University of Chicago Press.) (Keywords: Social Cognitions, Terrorism.)