

The First Amendment & Religious Freedom: Statements by Founding Fathers and U.S. Presidents

U.S. Presidents

The following are notable quotations and statements from U.S. Presidents expressing that our government is not based on any religion, and the founders intended a separation of church and state to ensure religious freedom:

Andrew Jackson – Seventh U.S. President

- *I could not do otherwise [call a day of prayer and fasting] without transcending the limits prescribed by the Constitution for the President and without feeling that I might in some degree disturb the security which religion nowadays enjoys in this country in its complete separation from the political concerns of the General Government. (Letter to the Synod of the Reformed Church of North America, June 12, 1832, explaining his refusal to proclaim a "day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer").*

Ulysses S. Grant – Eighteenth 18th U.S. President

- *Leave the matter of religion to the family altar, the church, and the private schools, supported entirely by private contributions. Keep the church and state forever separate. (Speech before the Army of the Tennessee, Des Moines, Iowa, 1875).*

Theodore Roosevelt – Twenty-Sixth U.S. President

- *I hold that in this country there must be complete severance of Church and State; that public moneys shall not be used for the purpose of advancing any particular creed; and therefore that the public schools shall be non-sectarian and no public moneys appropriated for sectarian schools. (Address, New York, October 12, 1915).*

Harry S. Truman – Thirty-Third U.S. President

- As I say, not all of Jefferson's ideas were popular, though most of them were absolutely right... He was also called an atheist because he didn't believe in a state church, an official church of the government, and in fact made it clear that he didn't much like any church at all, though he did admire many, though not all, of the teachings of religion.... And you'll recall that it was Jefferson, as governor of Virginia, who wrote the Statute of Religious Liberty in 1786, which said that 'no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship' but that all people 'shall be free to profess ... their opinion in matters of religion.' He summed up very bluntly one time his view that no man harmed anyone else in choosing and practicing his own religion, or no religion. 'It does me no injury,' he said, 'for my neighbor to say that there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.' (Where the Buck Stops; The Personal and Private Writings of Harry S. Truman, ed. by Margaret Truman; New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1989, pp. 212-213).*

Presidential Candidate John F. Kennedy – Thirty-Fifth U.S. President

I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute, where no Catholic prelate would tell the President (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the president who might appoint him or the people who might elect him.

I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish- where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the Pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all.

For while this year it may be a Catholic against whom the finger of suspicion is pointed, in other years it has been, and may someday be again, a Jew— or a Quaker- or a Unitarian- or a Baptist. It was Virginia's harassment of Baptist preachers, for example, that helped lead to Jefferson's statute of religious freedom. Today I may be the victim-, but tomorrow it may be you — until the whole fabric of our harmonious society is ripped at a time of great national peril. (Speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, September 12, 1960).

Lyndon B. Johnson – Thirty-Sixth U. S. President

- I believe in the American tradition of separation of church and state which is expressed in the First Amendment to the Constitution. By my office--and by personal conviction--I am sworn to uphold that tradition. (Interview, Baptist Standard, October, 1964).*

Jimmy Carter – Thirty-Ninth U.S. President

- *I'm a Southern Baptist, and I have always believed in a total separation of church and state. And I think the interjection of religion into politics is not good for this country....I don't accept human definitions of what I have to believe, you know, to be a Christian. (Interview, USA Today, May 12, 1986).*

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