

Editorials

Lincoln's own National Day of Prayer

This Thursday will mark the 58th annual National Day of Prayer observance. It is a time in which people in communities across the United States will pray for our local, state and national elected officials.

One need look only as far as our states and federal government to see what a predicament we are in as a nation. Many states are operating at a deficit. The national debt is spiraling hopelessly out of control.

Culturally, the foundations of our society are crumbling. The break-up of the family unit, callous disregard for human life as exemplified by abortion, a rapidly increasing prison population, lack of respect for authority and widespread drug abuse are indicative of a nation that has lost its moorings.

Can the ongoing, even accelerated, erosion of traditional values — of faith and morality — be stemmed? I believe the answer is “Yes” with some qualifiers.

The U.S. is in desperate need of two things at this critical juncture in history. First, a spiritual revival, whereby people who profess to be Christians are “revived,” or made alive in their faith. Second, America needs a great spiritual awakening, similar to ones experienced in previous centuries, in which people who do not know God enter into a personal relationship with Him through His Son, Jesus Christ.

A proclamation making the rounds in some churches holds particular relevance for us today. During some of the darkest days of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln responded to a resolution approved by the U.S. Senate. In his proclamation, our 16th president noted that the highest elected body in America recognized “the Supreme Authority and just Government of Almighty God, in all the affairs of men and of nations.” In addition, Lincoln noted that the Senate had requested him to set apart a day for “National prayer and humiliation.”

Wrote Lincoln: “And whereas it is the duty of nations as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord.

“And, inasmuch as we know that, by His divine law, nations like individuals are subjected to punishments and chastisements in the world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us, for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole People? We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But 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 that made us!

“It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.”

Lincoln, through the proclamation he signed on March 30, 1863, set apart Thursday, the 30th day of April, 1863, as a day of “national humiliation, fasting and prayer.” Furthermore, he asked all the people to abstain from their ordinary activities and to unite, in their places of public worship and in their homes “in keeping the day holy to the Lord, and devoted to the humble discharge of the religious duties proper to that solemn occasion.”

It was Lincoln's belief that if people sincerely humbled themselves before God, they could “rest humbly in the hope authorized by the Divine teachings, that the united cry of the Nation will be heard on high, and answered with blessings, no less than the pardon of our national sins, and the restoration of our now divided and suffering Country, to its former happy condition of unity and peace.”

Today, as during the Civil War, America is a divided nation. The values of people in large cities are radically different from the beliefs held by those who live in predominantly rural areas of the United States. One can see by the “red” states and “blue” states on an electoral map, and the fact that a number of key races end in a virtual dead-heat, only to be decided weeks or months later in a court of law, that we essentially are two Americas, with markedly different beliefs.

If we really want to be one nation under God, we must not forget God, as Lincoln said was the case when our country was in the throes of a civil war.

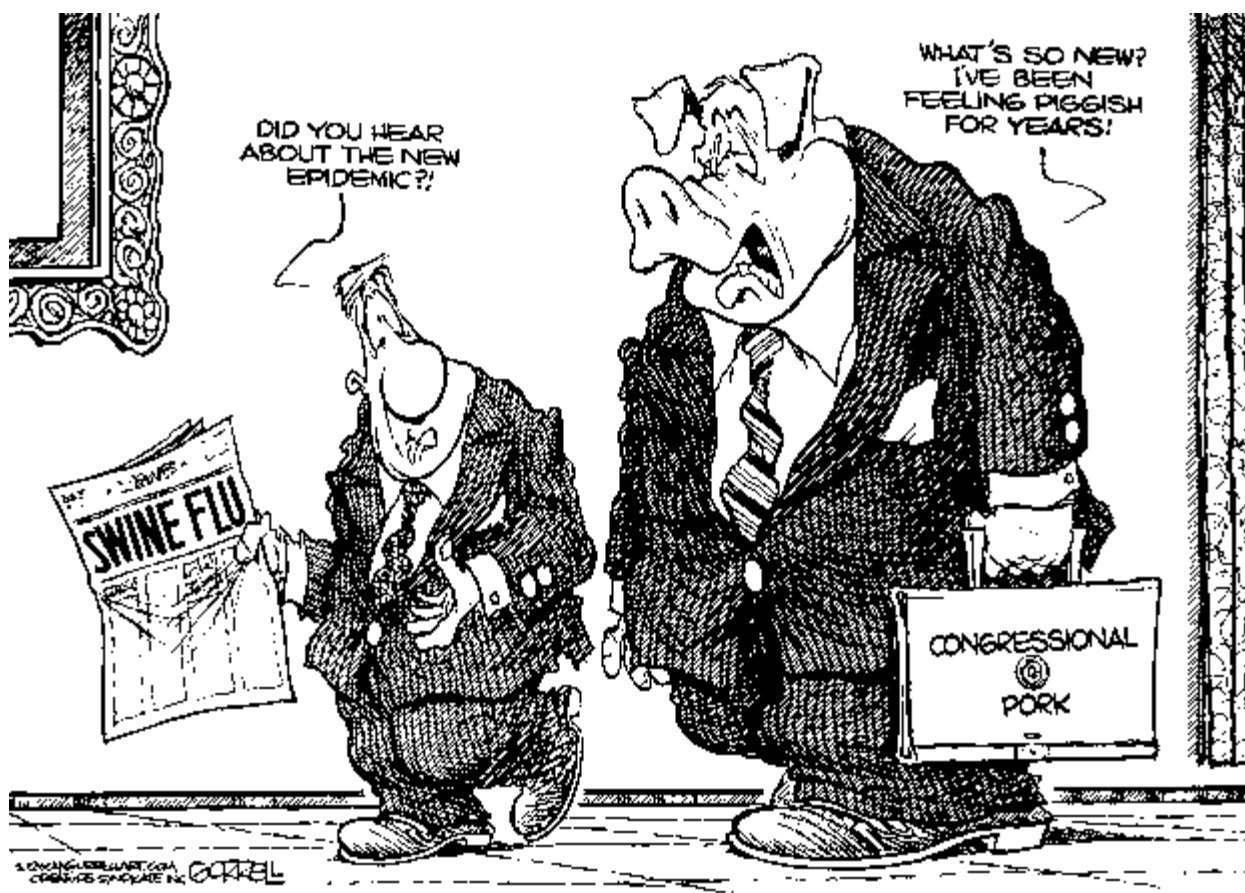
One important way to remember Him is to ask Him to give knowledge and breadth of wisdom to our elected leaders, at all levels. Our county's residents will have such an opportunity this Thursday during a 7 a.m. prayer breakfast hosted by the Lampasas County Ministerial Alliance at First Baptist Church in Lampasas.

In the lead-up to that observance, it would do each of us well to reflect upon Lincoln's proclamation issued almost 150 years ago. The document has stood the test of time, because it was based upon truth — God's truth. It's as timely now for us as it was for our forebears.

But the hour is late.

It is time we acknowledge, as Lincoln urged, a truth from Scripture and proven by all history “that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord.”

—Jim Lowe, editor and publisher



Indifference to the gospel

Just as the New York Times was front-paging a supposed upsurge in atheism (God? What God?) came complementary tidings from the Pew Research Center. To wit, it's not church spats over gay marriage or pedophilia that seem to be driving Christians out the door. A complex of concerns causes their switch to another religion or none at all: namely, disgust with perceived churchly hypocrisies, the rejection of teachings perceived as false, failure to meet personal spiritual needs, and so on.

Of the population, Pew says, 44 percent no longer embrace their childhood faiths. Pew says there wasn't necessarily, in these cases, a lot of faith that required dissipating. Ex-Catholics had less faith as children than co-religionists who stayed on. Pew reports, “Former Protestants who are now unaffiliated are less likely to have regularly attended worship services as a child and even less likely to have attended regularly as a teenager.”

Parental guidance and example may have been wanting — as perhaps it was wanting in the parents' own early lives. Or the lives of the parents' parents. Where these things start you never can tell. Somewhere, anyhow. Possibly in a radiated indifference on the part of religion's stewards — priests, teachers, evangelists? In a studied coolness to the fever and fervor of Gospel Christianity?

The habit of indifference, once contracted, is hard to shake off, except through direct experience or vivid communication of a general experience, from which human factor arise those suspicions of organized religion just mentioned — twinned with a certain loopiness about ends and means.

The present presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori, when asked by Time magazine a few years back to specify her focus as head of the church, replied, “Our focus needs to be on feeding people who go to bed hungry, on providing primary education to girls and boys, on healing people with AIDS, on addressing tuberculosis and malaria, on sustainable development.” And ... and ... On God, too? On Jesus? On sin and salvation? Not as the lady allowed. Not a word issued forth from her about those concerns for which the Episcopal Church — and all other churches — had supposedly gone into business.

The Peace Corps in ecclesiastical drag is what modern churches often resemble. You want to work for sustainable development? Well, then, off to church we go. It sounds a little silly, because it is silly. The govern-

ment and a complex of secular organizations already address these concerns, often quite intelligently. The ordering of the human relationship to God is the normal purpose of religion. Of course, as the New York Times' front-page story reminds us, no one is required to believe in God. Whoever wants can form a secular humanist society in order to do whatever secular humanist societies do: chiefly, it seems, rail at religious “stupidities.”

The non-beauty, sometimes, of the drift away from church affiliation is that the drifter — as the Pew study shows — wants to believe, but receives inadequate encouragement from those supposedly in the business of encouraging. Great numbers of Christian ministers seem to have missed their calling as research scientists, public policy experts, or congressmen.

No age is ever completely religious or completely secular. The present age takes some kind of cake for nearly complete confusion about what we're doing here in the first place. The modern churches' inability — or unwillingness — to connect human existence to human ends is undermining the churches themselves: Mrs. Jefferts Schori's (and my) church, for instance.

A committee of the Episcopal Church recently acknowledged that the church lost 10.5 percent of its members between 2003 and 2007, after it threw over traditional scriptural teaching about marriage relationships and consecrated a gay divorced man as bishop of New Hampshire.

Actions have consequences, the churches are finding. Non-actions, too. A Christian body isn't required by statute to soar in spirit at the idea of bringing others “to Christ.” What happens when it doesn't soar would seem a topic for volumes of sermons.

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William Murchison



So much for the ‘stimulus’

If you are a retiree, you recently received an “increase” in your retired pay from the Kenyan's administration. If you looked closely, though, you found that it was simply a reduction in your tax withholding. But before you go spending this windfall gift from the government, think about this:

I called and asked if this change represented a reduction in my tax liability for 2009 and was told it wasn't. So, come next April, you will get an unpleasant surprise. You will still be required to pay the taxes you would have paid had your federal income tax withholding not been lowered. Be prepared to owe the government the amount of your reduction times 8 (the number of months it will be reduced). This little bit of trickery comes to you courtesy of our Democrat majority and Obama, the Kenya Kid, under the guise of “economic stimulus.”

If you want to avoid the “April Surprise,” you have three options: a) file a W4 form and reinstate your original withholding amount (you still will probably owe at least one month's “reduction,” since it will take them awhile to change it back); b) put it in a savings account so it can draw a little interest until you pay it back in April; or c) spend it in hopes that the Kenya Kid will give you more money before you pay it back next April. The operative words are “pay it.”

So much for the “stimulus” that you are going to pay to yourself. The only stimulus for me was to stimulate me to replace every Democrat at the next elections, with the hope of putting a crimp in the Kenya Kid's plot in the near term, and changing Obama back to street activist in the long term!

D.D. Todd Kempner

Linda Chavez



Biden shows reckless foot-in-mouth disease

The White House, commendably, seems to be trying to quiet the hysteria building around swine flu, but apparently the vice president didn't get the memo. On Thursday, Vice President Joe Biden told Americans to stay out of airplanes, subways and other “confined spaces” on NBC's “Today Show.”

When asked whether he'd advise members of his family against traveling to Mexico, he offered this: “It's not just going into Mexico. If you're any place in a confined aircraft and one person sneezes, it goes all the way through the aircraft. ...That's me. I would not be at this point, if they had another way of transportation, suggesting they ride the subway.”

The vice president's office spent the rest of the day trying to downplay the boss's irresponsible comments. Biden's staff claims the vice president was telling family members: “If they are sick, they should avoid airplanes and other confined public spaces, such as subways.” But the fact is, words matter, and that is not what Biden said on TV. He wasn't telling sick people to stay home; he was instructing healthy people to do so out of simple, ignorant fear.

It's one thing for cable news — whose business model depends on whipping up public frenzy to drive ratings — to behave irresponsibly. It's quite another for the vice president to do so. Biden's foot-in-mouth disease could turn out to be more dangerous to Americans than the H1N1 virus.

At this point, swine flu is only a theoretical danger to most of us. The cases in the U.S. so far have been mild, and according to most experts there is little reason to believe this will change. Tens of thousands of Americans die every year from the flu, and yet the media and Joe Biden can't help but spread panic about swine flu, which has killed one person here in America so far.

But what would happen if the public decided to take the vice president's advice and stay off public transportation? We have actual experience on this front and know the consequences. The anxiety that kept people off airplanes and generally frightened people into staying home after the 9/11 attack made it difficult to recover from a mild recession in 2001 — and that was at a time when we had a relatively healthy

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economy.

Imagine what would happen in the U.S. if similar fears were to drive Americans into their bunkers now when we are in the midst of the worst recession in almost 30 years? GDP declined 6.1 percent in the first quarter 2009, following a decline of 6.3 percent the previous quarter. Can you guess what would happen to the American economy if everyone stayed home for the next three months?

We are all going to die sometime and from some cause, natural or otherwise. In 2005, the last year for which data are available, more than 45,000 Americans died from automobile accidents, and nearly 20,000 died from simple falls of one sort or another. Should we never step foot in a car or bathtub again for fear it might kill us?

Communicable diseases are scary. But common sense and good hygiene are the best protection. This is not 1918 — when the so-called Spanish flu, which may well have been a variant of swine flu — killed more than 50 million people worldwide. We have antibiotics and antiviral drugs. People are more educated and understand how disease spreads. And we have ways to communicate real threats when they occur, and to do so almost instantaneously.

But we also have the ability to spread misinformation and terror more broadly than at any time in history. The media make matters worse by screaming headlines and nonstop cable coverage on each new case that breaks out. This is the time for cool heads and genuine leadership. President Obama has shown both. Unfortunately, his second-in-command hasn't. Perhaps the most constructive thing the White House could do until swine flu blows over is quarantine the vice president.

Linda Chavez is the author of “An Unlikely Conservative: The Transformation of an Ex-Liberal” and a columnist with Creators Syndicate.

From the Bible

“How blessed are the people who are so situated;

How blessed are the people whose God is the Lord!”

Psalm 144:15