
46 AT 100: LIVE BY FAITH AND LEAD WITH SCIENCE

*Edward J. Larson**

I. INTRODUCTION: RELIGION AND SCIENCE IN AMERICA

Depending on which side of the chasm they inhabit, many Americans view the so-called conflict thesis as either the nation's Genesis account or in its DNA. This thesis pits religion versus science in all matters personal and political. "As for science and religion generally," historian Kathleen M. Sands writes about the United States today, "a majority of Americans think they are incompatible, and about 30 percent consider science incompatible with their personal religious beliefs."¹

This is nothing new. Among its founders, the United States had its ministers of faith like John Witherspoon and leaders of science like Benjamin Franklin—both signers of the Declaration of Independence. In that foundational document, the founders sought to bridge the gap with the artful reference to "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God,"² but generalities only go so far. By the first presidential election featuring political parties in 1800, Federalists promoted its candidate, John Adams, as a defender of the faith and damning his opponent, Thomas Jefferson, as a part of a conspiracy of Illuminati science while Republicans defended Jefferson as guided by science to treasure liberty and denounced Adams as promoting religious bigotry.³ By the late 1800s, two influential American books, John William Draper's *History of the Conflict between Science and Religion* (1874) and Andrew Dickson White's *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896), set the conflict thesis in stone.⁴ The 1925 trial of John Scopes for teaching evolution in a Tennessee public school

* Edward J. Larson holds the Hugh and Hazel Darling Chair in Law and is University Professor of History at Pepperdine University. He wishes to thank Nicholas Van Lauven for his research assistance.

1. KATHLEEN M. SANDS, *AMERICA'S RELIGIOUS WARS: THE EMBATTLED HEART OF OUR PUBLIC LIFE* 181 (2019).

2. THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE para. 1 (U.S. 1776).

3. EDWARD J. LARSON, *A MAGNIFICENT CATASTROPHE: THE TUMULTUOUS ELECTION OF 1800, AMERICA'S FIRST PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN 164–89* (2007).

4. Ronald L. Numbers, *Aggressors, Victims, and Peacemakers: Historical Actors in the Drama of Science and Religion*, in *THE RELIGION AND SCIENCE DEBATE: WHY DOES IT CONTINUE?* 30–33 (Harold W. Attridge ed., 2009).

propelled it into the twentieth century⁵ while ongoing partisan disputes over issues from the naturalness of sexual orientation⁶ to climate change policies⁷ carry it forward today.

The conflict persists because America is at once “the greatest scientific nation in the world”⁸ and a fundamentally religious country where four in five citizens profess to believe in God.⁹ As an antitheses-of-Trump candidate and incumbent president during his first 100 days, Joe Biden has sought to bridge the gap and unify America through living by faith while leading with science.

II. PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN: LIFE OF FAITH

The faith part comes from his deep Catholic religious and cultural roots. A descendent of Irish Catholic immigrants and product of parochial schools, Biden speaks of how nuns taught him to read, write, and do math. “The nuns,” he wrote in his 2007 memoir, “are one of the reasons I’m still a practicing Catholic.”¹⁰ Biden attends mass weekly and on Catholic holy days of obligation. He wears rosary beads. “All of the good things that have happened,” Biden told a national audience on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, “have happened around the culture of my religion and the theology of my religion.”¹¹

Following tradition, Biden began his public activities on inauguration day by attending church – but in his case at a Catholic cathedral rather than the Episcopal Church near the White House.¹² In one form or another, he invoked religion over ten times during his inaugural address on January 20, beginning with the words, “We come together as one nation, under God.” He repeated his campaign pledge “to restore the soul . . . of America.” He spoke of the path toward unity, “History, faith, and reason show the way.” He quoted Saint Augustine, “a saint of my church,” and the Bible. He led a silent prayer for those lost in the pandemic, ending with his audible, “Amen.” He urged Americans to “add our work and prayers to the unfolding story of our nation,” and spoke of being

5. EDWARD J. LARSON, *SUMMER FOR THE GODS: THE SCOPES TRIAL AND AMERICA’S CONTINUING DEBATE OVER SCIENCE AND RELIGION* 225–46, 264–66 (1997).

6. *E.g.*, SANDS, *supra* note 1, at 227–72.

7. *E.g.*, CHRIS DORAN, *HOPE IN THE AGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE* 102–03 (2017); EDWARD J. LARSON & MICHAEL RUSE, *ON FAITH AND SCIENCE* 254 (2017).

8. KENNETH R. MILLER, *ONLY A THEORY: EVOLUTION AND THE BATTLE FOR AMERICA’S SOUL* 10 (2008).

9. *When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?*, PEW RES. CTR. (Apr. 25, 2018), <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/> [<https://perma.cc/BW8P-2HFR>].

10. Meredith Newman, *How Biden’s Faith Shapes His Politics: Will It Decide the Election?*, USA TODAY (Oct. 29, 2020, 5:00 AM), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/elections/2020/10/29/how-bidens-faith-shapes-his-politics-decide-election/3676862001/> [<https://perma.cc/9NGP-Q5QX>].

11. *Id.*

12. See Brian Naylor, *Biden Attends Mass before His Swearing in As Nation’s 2nd Roman Catholic President*, NPR (Jan. 20, 2021, 9:39 AM), <https://www.npr.org/sections/inauguration-day-live-updates/2021/01/20/958731022/biden-attends-mass-before-his-swearing-in-as-nations-2nd-roman-catholic-president> [<https://perma.cc/H9UK-CEUN>] (“Presidents-elect frequently attend a church service prior to their swearing in, often at St. John’s Episcopal Church across Lafayette Square from the White House.”).

“Sustained by faith” for the tasks ahead,” before closing with the ritualistic, “May God bless America and may God protect our troops.”¹³

Appeals to faith continued throughout Biden’s first 100 days. Less than a week after taking office, for example, upon signing an executive order on racial equity, Biden invoked the biblical Golden Rule, “We’re all God’s children; we should treat each other as we would like to be treated ourselves.”¹⁴ At the National Prayer Breakfast on February 4, Biden related images of the pandemic, natural disasters, political extremism, racial turmoil, and domestic terrorism. “For so many in our nation this is a dark, dark time,” he said. “So where do we turn? Faith, Kierkegaard wrote, faith sees best in the dark. I believe that to be true. For me, [in] the darkest moments faith provides hope and solace, provides clarity and purpose as well. It shows the way forward.”¹⁵ On February 14, Biden reestablished the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships created under President George W. Bush but allowed to lapse under President Trump.

Biden’s life of faith can appeal even to those who question his policies on religious grounds. Despite objecting to his stance on abortion rights, Biden won a first-time endorsement from John Carr, Director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life. “Biden’s appeal to those people like me is personal—who he is, what he believes, where he comes from, what he says,” Carr explained.¹⁶ “Biden is a deeply committed Catholic in a way that Kennedy never was,” the conservative Christian presidential historian Gary Scott Smith notes with reference to the nation’s only other Catholic president. “It’s going to play a role in how he governs.”¹⁷ Perceptions matter in politics. Reporters noticed a picture of the president with Pope Francis on the credenza behind Biden as he signed an executive order restoring federal funding for family planning groups that also provide abortion services.¹⁸

III. THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION: LEAD WITH SCIENCE

On more prominent display in the Oval Office than the small photo of Pope Francis is the Duplessis portrait of the legendary founder-scientist Benjamin Franklin now hanging prominently near the Resolute Desk. To emphasize his

13. *Inaugural Address by President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.*, THE WHITE HOUSE (Jan. 20, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/20/inaugural-address-by-president-joseph-r-biden-jr/> [https://perma.cc/P3ZS-WWHG].

14. *Remarks by President Biden at Signing of an Executive Order on Racial Equity*, THE WHITE HOUSE (Jan. 26, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/26/remarks-by-president-biden-at-signing-of-an-executive-order-on-racial-equity/> [https://perma.cc/L6ZZ-MBNC].

15. *President Biden and Lawmakers Deliver Virtual Remarks at the 69th Annual National Prayer Breakfast*, C-SPAN (Feb. 4, 2021), <https://www.c-span.org/video/?507806-1/national-prayer-breakfast> (transcript).

16. Newman, *supra* note 10.

17. *Id.*

18. Maureen Groppe, *Why Joe Biden’s Faith-Based ‘Equity’ Agenda Is Getting Pushback from Religious Conservatives*, USA TODAY (Feb. 5, 2021, 10:56 AM), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2021/02/04/bidens-faith-based-equity-agenda-counters-trumps-religious-freedom-protections/4376093001/> [https://perma.cc/F7GV-PDBG].

pledge “to lead with science,” Biden installed this iconic painting to replace the one of the slaveholding and Indian-killing nationalist known for his toughness, Andrew Jackson, which Trump had placed there.¹⁹ Other evidence of the lead-with-science part of his religion-and-science two-step was evident during Biden’s first 100 days.

One week after the inauguration, the popular science magazine *Scientific America* reported, “Since taking office on January 20, President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris have signaled a clear commitment to science and pledged sweeping initiatives to reestablish and elevate its role in the federal government.”²⁰ The article listed numerous prominent scientists named by Biden to hold key policy posts in his administration.²¹ Also noting these nominations in a February 3 editorial and stressing their contrast with those of the Trump administration, the premier academic science journal *Nature* commented, “It’s a relief to see so much expertise back in government.”²²

Declaring, “The Federal Government must be guided by the best science and be protected by processes that ensure the integrity of Federal decision-making,” Biden issued an Executive Order on his first day as president directing an immediate government-wide review of all federal actions taken during the prior administration to ensure compliance with this mandate.²³ A week later, he followed with an Executive Memorandum stating, “It is the policy of my Administration to make evidence-based decisions guided by the best available science and data,” and directing all federal agencies to “expeditiously update any agency policies, processes, and practices issued or published” under the Trump administration not following this policy.²⁴ On the same day, January 27, Biden signed an Executive Order creating a President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (“PCAST”). He tapped pioneering MIT mathematical geneticist Eric Lander to serve as Assistant to the President for Science and Technology

19. See Jim Daley, *Biden Elevates Science in Week One Actions*, SCI. AM. (Jan. 28, 2021), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/biden-elevates-science-in-week-one-actions/> [<https://perma.cc/DNR3-3FWH>] (depicts the portrait as a “signal that science will guide the president”). A representative example of use by Biden of the “lead with science” pledge happened when announcing his top science advisors at the press conference on the Saturday prior to his to his inauguration. Michael Crowley, *Biden and Harris Introduced Members of Their White House Science Team*, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 16, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/16/us/politics/biden-harris-science-team.html> [<https://perma.cc/W6WS-7AVR>] (“President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr. said on Saturday that he was ‘always going to lead with science and truth.’”).

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.*

22. *Biden Has Assembled a Stellar Science Team—Now They Must Pull Together*, NATURE (Feb. 3, 2021), <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00184-y> [<https://perma.cc/P63R-C7H3>] (the editors added, “The world’s scientific community is hugely relieved to see this recommitment to scientific integrity in the US government after four years of neglect, dismissal, denial, suppression and political interference”).

23. *Executive Order on Protecting Public Health and the Environment and Restoring Science to Tackle the Climate Crisis*, THE WHITE HOUSE (Jan. 20, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-protecting-public-health-and-environment-and-restoring-science-to-tackle-climate-crisis/> [<https://perma.cc/28EQ-R7ED>].

24. *Memorandum on Restoring Trust in Government Through Scientific Integrity and Evidence-Based Policymaking*, THE WHITE HOUSE (Jan. 27, 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/27/memorandum-on-restoring-trust-in-government-through-scientific-integrity-and-evidence-based-policymaking/> [<https://perma.cc/4YUZ-NMZ4>].

(or “Science Advisor”) and raised the post to a cabinet-level position for the first time. Trump had left the post empty for eighteen months.²⁵ Lander will also direct the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (“OSTP”).

Reviewing Biden’s initial appointments to the OSTP and PCAST, *Nature* called it “a stellar science team” with “a once-in-a-generation opportunity to bring a fresh, cohesive and inclusive perspective on science policy.”²⁶ The professional website, *Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology News*, hailed it as “the Science Dream Team.”²⁷ In a speech unveiling its members, Biden stated to the American people, “This is a team that is going to help restore your faith in America’s place in the frontier of science and discovery.”²⁸

Beyond these initial moves, over the first one hundred days, Biden continued to put science at the center of his administration’s policies. When asked on March 25 at his first press conference about how his administration would deal with China, Biden stressed fair competition and led off with science:

First, we’re going to invest in American workers and American science. I said that all through the campaign and I say it again. And we’re – and I’m setting up my administration to be able to do that, which is that, you know, back in the ‘60s, we used to invest a little over 2 percent of our entire GDP in pure research and investment in science. Today, it’s 0.7 percent. I’m going to change that. We’re going to change that.

The future lies in who can, in fact, own the future as it relates to technology, quantum computing, a whole range of things, including in medical fields.

And so what I’m going to do is make sure we invest closer to 2 percent.²⁹

Even more that his words about scientific integrity and naming of top science advisors, this pledge of future funding marked the Biden Administration’s commitment to lead with science.

IV. CONCLUSION: FAITH AND SCIENCE

A telling example of how Biden balances religion and science appeared in his cover letter for the administration’s signature report, *National Strategy for the Covid-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness*, issued one day after he took office. In the letter, Biden began by reminding readers that, in his inaugural address, “I offered a prayer for the 400,000 Americans and counting who have lost their lives this past year from the once-in-a-century pandemic in our midst.” He

25. Carl Zimmer, *Biden to Elevate Science Adviser to His Cabinet*, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 26, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/15/science/biden-science-cabinet.html> [<https://perma.cc/F4L8-VR4H>].

26. See *Biden Has Assembled a Stellar Science Team*, *supra* note 22.

27. Julianna LeMieux, *Science Takes Center Stage in the Biden Administration*, GENETIC ENG’G & BIOTECHNOLOGY NEWS (Jan. 21, 2021), <https://www.genengnews.com/news/science-takes-center-stage-in-the-biden-administration/> [<https://perma.cc/Y4EQ-BRSB>].

28. Bill Barrow & Seth Borenstein, *Biden Says His Advisers Will Lead with ‘Science and Truth’*, AP (Jan. 18, 2021), <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-technology-francis-collins-022fc771e262e6f1c7e33ffe80e1d37b> [<https://perma.cc/VWU6-CB77>].

29. *Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference*, THE WHITE HOUSE (Mar. 25, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/03/25/remarks-by-president-biden-in-press-conference/> [<https://perma.cc/GD67-5TGH>].

went on to state that, “For the past year, we could not turn to the federal government for a national plan to answer prayers with action – until today.” That action, he noted, that answer to prayer, “will be driven by scientists and public health experts who will regularly speak directly to you, from political interference as they make decisions strictly on science and public health alone.”³⁰ Live by faith, lead with science. With this balance, President Biden hopes to unite a divided nation.

30. JOSEPH R. BIDEN JR., THE WHITE HOUSE, NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR THE COVID-19 RESPONSE AND PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS 4 (2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/National-Strategy-for-the-COVID-19-Response-and-Pandemic-Preparedness.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/825Y-LNKG>].