

Voting for Gods: The Apotheosis of American Politics

AP Seminar

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Visiting the nation's Capitol in Washington DC is a staple for students across the United States. Stepping into the middle of the Capitol building floor, tilted heads and mouths agape as one looks toward the infinite spiral of the Rotunda. In the center of this spectacle resides the *Apotheosis of George Washington* (Brumidi 1865), appearing as though it belongs in the Sistine Chapel and leaving students wondering why our nation's father is pictured floating with angels. This piece of art is a widely known example of the apotheosis phenomenon, which is ordinarily defined by Max Radin (2009) of the Cambridge University Press as "the process by which a man is raised to divinity." Raising to such a status has many implications, from holding someone on a higher pedestal than others to completely committing to defend all wrong-doings of the aforementioned idol. This raises the question: To what extent has the apotheosis of modern political figures attributed to the breaking down of the American legislative system? Influential figures have owned up to their faults before, such as Simone Biles and her struggles with mental health (Thompson II, 2021) and Franklin D. Roosevelt in the struggles the nation faced in the aftermath of the Great Depression and World War II. Yet, many politicians of today struggle with admitting their errors in policy. In modern affairs, this concern has grown increasingly with the distinct separation of democratic and republican parties and the formation of diehard voters. Many Americans have used politicians as a beacon to voice questionable opinions and act disruptively, with a wide range of outcomes such as losing social relations and diminishing familial respect to violent riots that still occupy the legislature in trying to resolve. Moreover, experts in religious, political, and historical fields find concern with the apotheosis mindset. Political analysts worry that such a phenomenon could skew election results to an unfair advantage and go against the separation of church and state, while religious leaders are anxious that the entire meaning of faith will be lost in the crossfire. In historical considerations, the

thought of repeating history provokes experts to advise against this extreme idolization.

Although apotheosis may have possible benefits, there is too much of a risk in giving someone enough power to the point where the idea of democracy is completely overthrown. Societies' awareness of political faults has been tainted by divine lenses, driving a return to centralized power affairs that humanity has experienced all too well within its history, as seen with the Chinese Mandate of Heaven and the European Divine Right of Kings. With these many approaches, there are bound to be triumphs and tribulations. However, is this method of thinking suitable for the modern world? Have the attempts to reinforce these mindsets within recent decades been appealing to the progress of society? America's foundations were built on escaping religious persecution and rule, so is it fair-minded to make a religion out of the politicians we've instated?

The idea of apotheosis originates far in the history of humanity when rulers were also considered religious figures appointed by divine beings. Specifically, the Mandate of Heaven and the Divine Right of Kings heavily embellish the role of supreme leaders. Figureheads were also not as heavily criticized as they may have been in the modern era, rather subject to more benefits within legislation. Thomas Conlan, a professor of East Asian Studies and History at Princeton University, illustrates the benefits of divine placement within the rule of 1468 Japanese military governor Ōuchi Norihiro. According to the report, "the case of the Ōuchi reveals that they used their wealth to enact rites which combined their followers into a community of belief. The movement of gods, or construction of religious institutions, served to determine the boundaries of their authority, and privileged western Japan as constituting the most sacred space of Japan from the mid-15th through the mid-16th century" (Conlan 2016). However, this concept was progressively amplified to the value that monarchs, emperors, and chiefs were gods themselves.

Within recent decades, the phenomenon of apotheosis has become a firm concern not just to those from historical and political standpoints but also to those within religious communities. John Tillman, a conservative Illinois politician and devout Christian advocate, relayed his worry as he stated “Sometimes the way patriotism slides towards holy reverence bothers me. The way the founding fathers (or current want-to-be leaders) are venerated as if they were apostles or Moses or Jesus, frightens me” (2023). Tillman’s proclamation directly concerns Conlan’s historical aspect, demonstrating that apotheosis has stretched from community building to something that even religious followers find disturbing. Not only have citizens of the United States set politicians equal to gods, but have thrown many aspects of accountability to the wind. The public no longer expects thorough explanations of governmental action until the scenario has escalated to a nationwide scandal. Simply, the general public is blind to disrupting government acts until it becomes a problem. Yet it is not impossible to acknowledge the errors of high-standing officials while also respecting their authority. Such a demonstration can be found within the British monarchy in power during the American Revolution. According to Linda Colley (1984), who is a professor at the Princeton University Department of History, “George III's reign had accustomed his subjects to expect two qualities of their monarch: first, the capacity for sporadic, glamorous show; second, a steady background of domestic responsibility” (pp 124-125). The British people of the 1760s to 1820s expected responsibility from their king, in turn holding him accountable to address flaws that the nation faced. King George III at that point had the divine right of kings within his power, forcing his people to believe that he was instituted by God. However, after the British commonwealth acknowledged that George III’s method of addressing the American Revolution was unsuitable for the well-being of his nation, they began the process of legitimizing the sacred standing of the King. Reforming the apotheosis

ideal within America would be far simpler than modifying the King, as America is not built on centuries-old expectations and a dependence on the Church. Instead, the United States was built on breaking free from such traditions, in turn leading to the question of how apotheosis became fortified within the nation in the first place.

Within the United States political system, there are many different representatives from different regions of the nation. Not only do they differ in upbringing and opinion, but also the question as to who is “an authority” versus “in authority.” According to Dr. Charles Helm and Dr. Mario Morelli (1979), professors in political sciences and philosophy respectively, one who is “in authority is occupation of some office, position or status.” Contrastingly, one who is “an authority is on the person possessing a special understanding or expertise that entitles the authority to our respect.” Although someone may hold a standing in political office, there is room for speculation as to who is truly worthy of such a position and whether or not they know what they are talking about. The American voting system enables accessibility to obtaining office, no matter if one’s morals and policies are skewed. In turn, a specific politician may be able to seize control and bend public opinion to only see the positives of their administration. This method has been utilized historically, contributing to exceptionalism and ignorance within the American political culture. Diane F. George (2023), who is an attorney and adjunct professor at Fordham University, highlighted that historical entitlement and obligation have provided humanity, and America specifically, with a justification for acts of extreme and violent nature. If all of these aspects were backed by a political power that is simply a biased voice in authority, with a layer of divine status, the fundamentals of accountability would become forgotten. When an enabler is in control, one does not question whether the leader knows what they are working towards or if their ideas are right or wrong. They simply follow in the leader’s path because it is

what they originally believe is right, without considering other valuable factors. In correlation, the aforementioned leader will have no obligation to take accountability for what truly happened within their ruling administration. This contrasts severely with an honest leader, who would not only address both successes and failures but also problems that are faced initially. Such an honest leader is exemplified by Franklin D. Roosevelt in his Inaugural Address, announcing “I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished” (1937). Doing such an act formally displays Roosevelt’s humanity and honesty as a respectable leader, making him an authority in American democracy. However, many modern leaders contrast heavily with this courage, instead concealing their intentions from the general public. A firm and current example of such secretive institutions include President Donald Trump’s Mar-a-largo document harboring, which allegedly details unknown aspects of both President Trump, President Biden, and former President Barack Obama, among others. This modern demonstration of secretive politicians parallels many past politicians, both being interpreted as gods yet not expected to be transparent about possible drawbacks to progress.

As the world progresses and political parties play a never-ending tug of war, impending global issues become more of a concern for those of the general public. Per a report conducted and published by the Pew Research Center in 2023, a survey of 5,115 representative people stated that inflation, health care affordability, and partisan cooperation are top concerns of the American people. All of these issues stem from actions that politicians have or have not taken. Such a notion proves that politicians too can make mistakes, and they are not the godly beings that many pin them to be. Although politicians are humans raised to a higher standard, former Cornell and current Columbia Masters student Sydney Browne points out the similarities between modern politicians and gods of mythology. For instance, “[both] have a great influence

on the world/country through what they control [and are] a single being tasked with caring for the interests of an entire civilization/community/city/state/etc” (Browne 2022). Furthermore, Browne later presents an intriguing analogy to the Greek god, Zeus. He was the god of the heavens, yet made a thorough amount of mistakes. However, when these mistakes were made, everyone in Ancient Greece knew it was Zeus’ doing. The same level of transparency should be applied to the jurisdiction of American politicians. Politicians should be obligated to share the way they vote on certain policies, and then be subject to feedback from the people who elected them. This is essential to supporting the idea of democracy as a whole, as representatives are meant to voice the opinions of the people. The people should be able to provide criticism and praise for their elected officials, not give them unrestricted control. Such feedback would also influence whether or not voters will select the aforementioned officials in the next election, therefore influencing the entire future of the country and its progressive stance. However, one drawback to such a process is that not everyone is an expert in political sciences, therefore creating the possibility of too many uneducated chefs in the kitchen. Yet, such a problem can be resolved, as historically shown through Confucian empirical rule. Dingxin Zhao, a Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Chicago, exemplifies that “the emperor was legitimized as the son of heaven, but the heavenly mandate was subject to the interpretation of meritocratically selected Confucian bureaucrats, and the emperor had to exercise his power through the indispensable assistance of Confucian scholars who controlled the sophisticated bureaucracy” (p. 43). Figureheads would have access to a council that could advise for the greater good of the people. An equal balance of opinion based on rationality and not political affiliation, running the ins and outs of the government. Yet, such a solution is what democracy

was intended for in the first place, demonstrating the dramatic turn modernization has driven from foundations.

The apotheosis of modern political figures stems from historical exceptionalism and ancient ideas of those in control being appointed by gods. Yet, the modern world is too advanced for such ideals, making apotheosis impractical and against the fundamentals of American history and progress.

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