

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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January 15, 2025

SENT VIA EMAIL: info@trumpvancetransition.com

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President-Elect
Trump Tower
725 5th Avenue
New York, NY 10022

Re: Please take secular presidential oath of office as provided for in Constitution

Dear President Trump:

We write on behalf of more than 90 million nonreligious Americans, including our organization's more than 41,000 members, to respectfully ask you to leave religion out of the official, public inauguration. Specifically, we request that you take the secular oath of office as provided for in Art. 2, Sect. 1 of the U.S. Constitution — e.g., minus reference to a deity or swearing upon a bible — and cancel the six official prayers, an absurd number.

It is reported that you are, once again, populating the public inauguration with numerous clergy, including Rev. Franklin Graham, Cardinal Timothy Dolan and others. Privately hosted worship services being held to celebrate your inauguration are another matter, of course, and we would have no objection based on the Establishment Clause. (We might question your taste in ultra-conservative clergy.) But we and our membership do strenuously object to turning a secular, civic event into a religious circus. You were not elected pastor in chief, but president of all the people. Prayer hosted by the government should not be part of taking a ceremony about pledging fealty to a secular Constitution. The fact that you feel it necessary to involve clergy from four different religions shows the divisiveness of religion. And in fact those prayers will nevertheless exclude not only nonbelievers but many Americans who belong to other religions or denominations.

Regarding the presidential oath, the framers of our entirely secular Constitution thought its wording was so important that they composed and included it in the Constitution itself. Notably, the presidential oath contains no directive to swear to a deity or to place a hand on a bible. The Constitution is often deliberately broad, but in the case of the presidential oath is explicit. The president-elect “shall take the following oath or affirmation: ‘I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of president of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.’” We Americans should all take pride in the fact that we were first among nations to adopt a godless Constitution, investing sovereignty not in some deity or king, but in “We, the People.”

Omitting God from the oath was no accident. The Founders deliberated this language at the Constitutional Convention, a deliberation that is mirrored in the first bill Congress passed under

the Constitution and the first bill President Washington signed into law. As originally proposed, that law proposed congressional oaths with clauses reading “in the presence of Almighty God” and “So help me GOD.” Both were edited out.

Washington did not say “so help me God” when he took the oath.¹ Nor did any other of the first 26 presidents.²

The first reliable, contemporaneous account of any president saying these words along with the oath comes nearly a century after the country’s founding, at Chester A. Arthur’s public inauguration in 1881.³ Arthur was actually already president. He had taken the oath as specified in the Constitution immediately after learning that President James Garfield had finally succumbed to the assassin’s bullet, after a lingering 10-week-long infection. For the second, public oath, Chief Justice Morrison Waite read the oath and Arthur didn’t repeat it verbatim, instead replying simply, “I will, so help me God.”⁴

The first time “so help me God” was added to the oath by a newly-elected president was 1909, 130 years after our founding. But the tradition didn’t take hold until 1917. Like Arthur, Woodrow Wilson took two oaths, adding “so help me God” to the second, superfluous oath. He had taken the presidential oath the day before in a somewhat private ceremony in which he did not add the religious phrase, though he used it in the public ceremony the next day.⁵ Up through Wilson’s private 1917 oath, the religious phrase had been used only twice in 40 oaths.

The explicit language of our Constitution’s presidential oath was good enough for George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and the rest of the first 26 presidents. It should be good enough for you as well.

You are the president of *all* the people regardless of religious belief or disbelief. Invoking a god only some citizens worship signals exclusion of the 28 percent of adult Americans today who identify as nonreligious.⁶ The “Nones” are the fastest-growing segment by religious identification in the United States, as Pew Research Center has well-documented. Nearly 37 percent of Americans overall are non-Christian, either practicing a minority religion, as does your daughter, Ivanka, and son-in-law, or no religion at all. More and more U.S. citizens object to our civic leaders injecting divisive religion into politics.

The tampering with the oath provided for in the Constitution violates the spirit of our secular Constitution in the very act of promising to uphold it. The Constitution prohibits rather than mandates religious oaths as it bars religious tests for public office. In its altered, religious form, the oath has become a symbol of the disregard many in our nation have shown for our secular foundational principles. Reciting the presidential oath as provided for would be an important symbolic step toward divorcing American politics from religion.

¹ <https://www.slttrib.com/religion/global/2025/01/11/why-is-so-help-me-god-presidential/>.

² <https://progressive.org/latest/god-out-of-presidential-oath-seidel-210119/>.

³ <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/wmborj/vol20/iss3/5/>.

⁴ <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1881/09/23/98566684.pdf>.

⁵ https://www.google.com/books/edition/Second_Inauguration_of_Woodrow_Wilson_as/dXs2AQAAMAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0.

⁶ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe/>.

We would respectfully suggest that instead of placing your hand on the bible while taking the oath, you place it on the U.S. Constitution, the document that unites us all under that hallowed mantle, “We the People.”

Our message to you, as it is to public officials everywhere, is: Get off your knees and get to work, using reason, compassion and the Constitution — not religion — as your guide.

Very truly,

Handwritten signatures of Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker in blue ink. The signature for Annie Laurie Gaylor is on the left and the signature for Dan Barker is on the right.

Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-Presidents
Freedom From Religion Foundation