

Remembering the 41st President and an Important 1st Amendment Right

America's 40th President, Ronald Reagan, observed, "Freedom prospers when religion is vibrant and the rule of law under God is acknowledged." His successor, our 41st President, George H. W. Bush, as a man of religious faith,

shared Reagan's views on this important symbiotic relationship. In 1992, President Bush signed the legislation that established **Religious Freedom Day**, to be annually observed on **January 16**, beginning in 1993. It was on January 16, 1786, that the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom was passed, which protected rights of religious conscience in Virginia and eventually influenced the inclusion of the 1st right specified in the 1st Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof".

During his presidency, George H. W. Bush was not hesitant, in his speeches and proclamations, to refer to the significance of religious freedom and prayer to the founding generation's understanding of liberty, to our nation's history, and to the development of the unique American character. An example is found in his 1989 National Day of Prayer Proclamation:

"Throughout our Nation's history, Americans have been a prayerful people, giving thanks to our Creator for the blessings of liberty and seeking His help and guidance in preserving them. Those who braved the long ocean journey from Europe to settle in the American colonies were men and women of varied, but equally devout, religious beliefs. Many had been persecuted for those religious beliefs at home, and they sought a new land where they might be able to worship freely. Years later, our forefathers would clearly remember this [in] our Bill of Rights.

"But it was not just the experience of their ancestors that led the Founding Fathers to shape a free and democratic government for our Nation. On the contrary, their view of the rights of man and the proper role of government were derived from their firm faith in God. They believed that all men are created equal, 'endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights'. Any system of government they established must guarantee individual liberty and equality before the law, for freedom is the God-given right of all men. Calling for daily prayer at the Constitutional Convention, a number of delegates expressed their conviction that only with divine guidance would the new democracy be true and successful....[They] knew that human wisdom alone could neither build nor keep a free and just government.

"The great faith that led our Nation's Founding Fathers to pursue this bold experiment in self-government has sustained us in uncertain and perilous times; it has given us strength and inspiration... Like them, we do well to recall our 'firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence,' to give thanks for the freedom and prosperity this Nation enjoys, and to pray for continued help and guidance from our wise and loving Creator. For what President Washington wrote 200 years ago remains true today: 'the liberty enjoyed by the people of these States, of worshipping Almighty God agreeably to their consciences, is not only among the choicest of their blessings, but also of their rights.'"

Also to be remembered in January are the contributions of an important leader in the cause of civil rights in our country, a man whose religious convictions helped to shape his understanding of liberty for all Americans. **Martin Luther King Day** is observed this year on January 21.

Priscilla Poese, Americanism Chair

