

# The Reference Shelf<sup>®</sup>



## Representative American Speeches 2004–2005

Edited by Calvin M. Logue,  
Lynn M. Messina, & Jean DeHart

## Peel Back the Label

**Kenneth S. Beldon**

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**Editors’ introduction:** During the weekly worship service on the Sunday after the presidential election in 2004, Reverend Beldon addressed his congregation. Aware of the “divisiveness” caused by the campaign, Reverend Beldon reminded those present that “political life in America has always been hard fought.” “As a religious community,” he counseled, “we have a calling as well that transcends party or politics, a mission to make our values manifest regardless of whether these ideas win or lose at the ballot box.” The River of Grass congregation is a liberal religious community in Western Broward County, Florida, and is part of the Unitarian Universalist Association. The mission of the church is to provide a caring spiritual community that helps its members in the quest for meaning and purpose in life.

**Kenneth S. Beldon’s speech:** The *New York Post* had this to say about one of the candidates: “A vote for [him] is a vote against God. If he is elected president, the people of the nation will receive the just vengeance of an insulted heaven, will witness our dwellings in flames, hoary hairs bathed in blood, female chastity violated and children writhing on the pike . . .”

Perhaps those last few archaic phrases give it away; The *Post* wasn’t writing about this election, and the man referred to, whose Presidency would most surely bring about doom wasn’t John Kerry or George W. Bush. The year was 1800 and the politician was Thomas Jefferson who was locked in a bitterly divided, geographically polarizing, personally antagonistic race against John Adams.

Jefferson, the author of what is universally recognized as our most holy national writ, the most esteemed and debated and revered of the Founders. From our perspective we know that Jef-

person helped give birth to our nation, so what a silly prediction it seems to us to make that Jefferson's Presidency would bring about the end of the Republic even as it was just getting started. With over two centuries of American history in our rearview mirror, we look back at this judgment in laughter.

This history lesson is really a moral tale this morning. However we feel about the outcome of Tuesday's presidential contest—depressed, satisfied, encouraged, disappointed—we've all heard about or experienced the bitterness, the divisiveness, the supposedly unprecedented cleavage that this election revealed through the heart of America and think that somehow we're unique in the utter discord of our era; that this time America is irredeemably fractured.

But it's just not true. Political life in America has always been hard fought and electoral maps have always revealed that from among the *unum*, there is the *pluribus*, the many, varying perspectives within America that has always comprised America. Don't believe the myth that we are now so divided that we don't know how we can possibly go forward from here. Elections are contests and contests are based upon opposites. But there are truths greater than opposition in our national life.

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The great blessing of American life is that we don't lurch from revolution to revolution, we continue to exist from administration to administration, now for over 200 years, and peacefully so internally for 150 years. When you study the blood soaked history of kings and regimes and dictators, you realize what a noble experiment our nation is.

We can affirm this morning, as the President of our denomination did this past week that our faith in democracy is deserved not because of a particular outcome but because of the process of democracy itself. Unlike four years ago, in this close election, there was a clear-cut winner. There was something oddly enlivening about being a Floridian four years ago in the weeks after the 2000 election. Sort of like when a child misbehaves because s/he knows that then they'll be the center of attention, we knew that all eyes were upon us back then, on our chads and our recounts, and regardless of the reason, it was sort of thrilling to be involved in the drama.

I've a feeling, though, that if we saw a repeat this time around, whether in our own state or elsewhere, we would have been like the survivors of a horror movie who make it to the sequel, only to discover that still the monster lives, and we would have just wanted to huddle in the corner, whimpering, "Please, please just make it go away." This morning we don't have to live in the light of uncer-

tainty. Our election went forward, and our election revealed the will of the American people who cared enough to vote and be involved. That is as it should be and is deserving of our national faith.

As for the outcome of the election itself, I've seen enough of your bumper stickers and been around enough of you this week to know that many, not all by any means, but many of you are disappointed. Personally, my candidate did not win, either. But, I'm not here this morning to preach to you as a registered Democrat; you have not called me to be your minister to perform in such a capacity, and as there are many finer places to receive election analysis you won't hear 20 minutes more this morning of those thoughts from this pulpit.

This is as good a moment as any be mindful of what Rev. Sinkford also said this week to all of us in his open letter to our Unitarian Universalist communities—that we are liberal religion, we are not liberal politics. Some of you stand to my right politically, and some of you to my left, but we all stand together this morning as Unitarian Universalists.

We don't gather every four years as political conventions do to nominate a candidate to take us through an election; we gather every week in all sorts of seasons to give testimony to our values of compassion and care and encouragement to one another, and to stand as a testament to the kind of rare and precious religious community that does not hold each other to the narrowest test of creed or practice, but instead exists to enlarge our circle of hope to all who wish to belong to this people.

In whatever emotional place you find yourself this morning in regard to the election, I encourage you to stay involved in our democratic process. Democracy happens more often than just every four years. In one of the many, many morals and meanings that still spin out of from September 11th, remember that even as people rushed to give blood after the horrific events of that day, that it was those who gave blood on that ordinary day of September the 10th whose gifts meant the most, because their blood was already there when the need was the greatest. If this election burned itself deep down into your psyche, then I encourage you to mourn, or to celebrate, as you must, and then get back to the business of being a citizen in our nation, a calling that echoes beyond just the moment of any particular election.

As a religious community we have a calling as well that transcends party or politics, a mission to make our values manifest regardless of whether these ideas win or lose at the ballot box. Jim Wallis, the editor of *Sojourners Magazine*, phrased it well this past week in his reflection on the election:

Clearly, God is not a Republican or a Democrat, as we sought to point out, and the best contribution of religion is precisely not to be ideologically predictable or loyally partisan but to

maintain the moral independence to critique both the left and the right.

In a deeply polarized country, commentators reported that either political outcome would “crush” the hopes of almost half the population. So perhaps the most important role for the religious community will come now, when the need for some kind of political healing and reconciliation has become painfully clear. In the spirit of America's greatest religious leader, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., the religious community could help a divided nation find common ground by moving to higher ground. And we should hold ourselves and both political parties accountable to the challenge of the biblical prophet Micah to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.”

Wallis knows that religion is at its best when it is not co-opted by partisan affiliation. To me the most dismaying dynamic of the campaign season was the way in which both sides played the religion card against the other.

In just the two weeks leading up to the election right here in Broward, on successive Sunday mornings Senator Kerry appeared in the pulpit of a Baptist Church and a former Republican legislator from Texas occupied central space in the worship service of Calvary Chapel. From my perspective, both messages are spiritually unacceptable, because the meaning behind each is that religious identity is easily translated into a particular political party's platform. People within a faith community can share a core set of values even if they disagree about how best to implement those values and even about whether a political solution should have any hand in the broadcasting of those values. A God who is a Democrat or a Republican is simply a God fashioned into too small a human package, an idol set up to convince us of the rightness of our cause. To me, God must always be an Independent.

This year I chose not to put a candidate's sticker upon my car. Win or lose, the sticker would have to be torn off anyway come November 2nd. Instead, as some of you may have seen, my back bumper reads, “Civil Marriage is a Civil Right,” sponsored by our Unitarian Universalist Association. In states both red and blue, 11 states in all, voters denied the right for gays and lesbians to be wed. If you read the polling, you know that marriage equality is opposed by some of the core voting constituents of the Democratic Party. But I wanted a statement that spoke for the values of my religion, and this community, which is a Welcoming Congregation, and practices Universalism in both word and deed. That sticker isn't coming off, because it speaks for something bigger than a political party, and for a value that goes to the heart of my faith.

And there are other values as well that go to the heart of our faith and transcend any easy label and bind us, each to the other, qualities that allow us to speak together and be together regardless of difference. I was a first year student at an overwhelmingly left-wing college when the small band of campus Young Republicans spon-

sored a lecture by a group of Contras from Nicaragua. The visit barely came off because of protestors, and as the spokesperson for the Contras approached the microphone to deliver his speech, the leader of the Socialist Youth on campus began haranguing him and shouted him down, along with dozens of others.

At that point the leader of the Young Republicans stepped to the microphone and began exchanging insults with the Socialist Youth leader. Back and forth, the insults rang, "You're a fascist stooge with blood on your hands!" "You're a proletariat who serves a communist totalitarian master." "Get a life, son of the ruling class." "Get a haircut, you Stalinist moron." Back and forth it went. The Contra leader eventually spoke briefly and then left. So much for political dialogue or even effective protest.

Anyway, about two days later, I was walking through the campus center and, there, at a table before me, was the leader of the Socialist Youth and the leader of the Young Republicans, sitting together, talking, laughing, drinking coffee. First of all, it made me think that part of their show the other night was just that, a demonstration to prove their ideological bona fides to their respective followers that was, like a lot of politics, manufactured drama. As I sat and pretended to read across from them and peered at them over my book, I saw that the yelling the other night might have been the act, because what they were sharing was real and authentic; they truly enjoyed each other's company. I walked away feeling almost a sense of relief, and believing then as I do to this day, that there is a truth of human relationship deeper than partisanship that will reveal itself if we allow it to.

It is also a psychological truth that the closer you are to someone the more pronounced your differences can become. As an example, look at two siblings who are similar in age in the back seat of a car fighting for control of who has 51% elbow room of the armrest between them and you'll understand what I mean. In any contest where the outcome is in doubt things will become heated, with the differences magnified and similarities dismissed. That's certainly true in politics. Right now red and blue seem like opposing pieces in a board game.

Clearly there is a general tide of red and blue states in this country, broken down regionally. But even in a very blue state like Connecticut, 44% of the people voted for the President. In a red state like Tennessee, Senator Kerry received 43% of the vote. In red states there are millions of Kerry voters and in blue states, there are millions of Bush voters. No state is just one thing.

More importantly, no person is just one thing. We have become so accustomed these last few weeks of seeing the American people as segments on a pie chart, sliced into segments of race, age, gender, income level, province all in the attempt to correlate voter preference to demographic profile. All political operatives have to look at the world this way, but a religious com-

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munity should not. If we do, we risk losing the individual trees for our attempts to take in the whole forest. If our Universalist heritage makes a meaningful difference in our lives, if we assert that all are welcome and all matter, then to look at the world and its people as types and labels is a violation of our faith.

Our Universalism leads us in the path away from superficial understanding. In this election, both former NYC Mayor Ed Koch and Rev. Pat Robertson supported the President. Do they both see the world exactly the same? Both President Eisenhower's son and Michael Moore supported Senator Kerry; how much do we assume they have in common? On the other side, one of my best friends in the world almost always votes Republican. We talk religion, music, baseball, love, family, but don't agree on politics. But I would trust my life in his hands.

There is no such thing as a Kerry supporter and there is no such thing as a Bush voter. There is no such thing as a Republican and no such thing as a Democrat. Not absolutely. Call this my Snowflake Theology. When each of us is treated as a gift, each of us unique, then we can begin seeing what we might have truly in common. Seeing the world with labels attached is shorthand that enables us to get a quick glimpse of the world and make a judgment. It's a necessary tool for knowing which car to buy or which detergent we like, but shorthand will only reveal the most obvious aspects of our existence. Labels are never the path to wisdom.

A colleague of mine, the Reverend Barbara Merritt, tells of a day she spent in the company of a male fundamentalist minister clearing an abandoned, drug-strewn lot in Worcester, MA, where they both serve religious communities. As they carefully picked up the used hypodermics and empty crack vials, Barbara reflected on the fact that in the theology of this fundamentalist, Barbara was doubly suspect, both as a Unitarian Universalist and as a woman ordained to ministry. At the same time, though, here were the two of them sharing a common religious dedication, outside on a blustery New England day, trying together to beautify a forgotten portion of the world that had been abandoned to ugliness. What mattered more—his theology or their mutual help? As the garbage around them diminished, she had her answer, one that confirmed in her heart the Universalism to which she had dedicated her life.

Among the most beautiful portions of Scripture are the Psalms, timeless like Shakespeare is timeless because a psalm gets inside of what faith and doubt and devotion and hope feel like. Psalm 139 asks this question, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts." Search me, open me up, get to the core of me and see who I am.

That is not a political inquiry, for politics, as Bismarck famously said, is the art of what is possible. But religion is the realm of the imaginable, and it takes time to reveal the depths of the imagination. Much longer than a political season, much longer than it takes a person to tell you how they voted. That's just one thing about us. And far from the most important thing. "Search me and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts"; such is an invitation into the essence of who we are, a more wide ranging call to be a religious people. Let us go forward in that spirit together.

Amen. I love you. May you live in blessing.