

# Appendix

## Did George Washington say, “So help me God”?

The long-standing tradition that George Washington capped his oath of office on April 30, 1789, with the words, “So help me God,” has recently fallen into question. Critics argue that these words, together with the image of Washington bending down to kiss the Bible after swearing his oath, belong in the historical dustbin together with young George cutting down the cherry tree. The inaugural legend, they say, is nothing more than a pious addition to Washington mythology with no basis in historical fact.

It is true that the first report of Washington avowing, “So help me God” dates from 67 years after the event. In George Washington: a Biography, Washington Irving writes:

The chancellor [Robert R. Livingston] advanced to administer the oath prescribed by the Constitution, and Mr. [Samuel A.] Otis, the secretary of the Senate, held up the Bible on its crimson cushion. The oath was read slowly and distinctly, Washington at the same time laying his hand on the open Bible. When it was concluded, he replied solemnly, “I swear—so help me God!” Mr. Otis would have raised the Bible to his lips but he bowed down reverently and kissed it.

Irving’s most recent biographer considers his book on Washington, which Irving deemed the capstone of his literary career, “well-researched, highly energetic, and still-

accessible.” The question remains, was Irving’s imagination a bit too energetic in drawing this reverent portrait? A contemporary account of the inaugural ceremonies, coupled with other secondary evidence, suggests that it was not.

One vivid portrait of Washington taking the presidential oath comes from an eyewitness to the ceremony, courtesy of a letter written three days after the inauguration, which Philadelphia’s Federal Gazette published on May 8.

The scene was solemn and awful, beyond description. It would seem extraordinary that the administration of an oath, a ceremony so very common and familiar, should, in so great a degree, excite the public curiosity. But the circumstances of his election—the impression of his past services—the concourse of spectators—the devout fervency with which he repeated the oath—and the reverential manner in which he bowed down and kissed the sacred volume—all these conspired to render it one of the most august and interesting spectacles ever exhibited on the globe. It seemed, from the number of witnesses, to be a somber appeal to heaven and earth at once. Upon the subject of this great and good man, I may, perhaps, be an enthusiast, but, I confess, I was under an awful and religious persuasion that the Gracious Ruler of the Universe was looking down at that moment with peculiar complacency on an act, which, to a part of his creatures was so very important. Under this impression, when the Chancellor pronounced, in a very feeling manner, “Long live George Washington,” my sensibility was wound up to such a pitch, that I could do no more than wave with the rest, without the power of joining in the repeated acclamations which rent the air.

Clearly, Irving was not mistaken about Washington bending down to kiss the Bible. Whether the spectator's account of "the devout fervency with which he repeated the oath" arose from Washington avowing God's name in his pledge we cannot know. But it certainly accords with the spirit of this testimony, which, in turn, confirms other details in Irving's description of the event.

Less tellingly, but reinforcing the same impression, Washington's principal aide, David Humphreys, who accompanied the president-elect to Federal Hall on Inauguration Day, rejoiced at Washington's civil piety as if it were a matter of public record. On May 9, nine days after the inauguration, he gave thanks in an article written for the Pennsylvania Mercury that the new nation had been consecrated on a Christian footing. Crediting him with more faith than Washington would presume to claim for himself, Humphreys wrote in the afterglow of the president's swearing-in and subsequent worship ceremony:

I rejoice in the exaltation of a person to the head of the Union, who professes himself to be a Christian, who is not ashamed to confess Christ, glory in his cross, and publicly honor his institutions; and hope and pray, that all our rulers may follow his illustrious example, and be politically as well as religiously wise to promote, both by law and practice, the best interests of their country, by promoting the Christian religion.

Although only six-years-old at the time, Irving too was present in person at the inauguration of his famous namesake. In doing research for his biography or in shared reminiscence over the years, he likely tested his memories against those of other eyewitnesses. Irving's biography is free of the pious cant that compromises certain other early treatments of Washington's life, and he certainly had no religious ax to grind, being himself a thoroughgoing secularist. Taken together, these considerations, coupled with the above evidence, add strength to the verisimilitude of Irving's testimony.

Despite the secular language prescribed by the Constitution, that Washington should invoke God at the end of his oath of office would by no means have seemed exceptional at the time. Earlier that month, on April 6, the House drafted language for its own members' swearing in ceremonies that included the same sacred codicil:

"I, \_\_\_\_\_, a Representative of the United States in the Congress thereof, do solemnly swear (or affirm, as the case may be) in the presence of Almighty GOD, that I will support the Constitution of the United States. So help me GOD." Two months later they reversed themselves, voting into law language stripped of all religious reference requiring members of Congress only "to support the Constitution of the United States." These competing oaths frame the vigorous debate being waged at the outset of the first Congress between those legislators who wished to guide government practice strictly by the constitution and others who believed that a nod to the deity was essential to reverent statecraft. (I reprise this debate in detail in Chapter One.) The leader of the latter faction, Senator Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, chaired the joint committee responsible for planning the inaugural festivities. It was Lee who proposed adding inaugural worship to the ceremony, which he appears to have fashioned on British precedent. That Lee, a

pious Anglican, held principal responsibility for fashioning the inaugural ceremony further suggests that Washington might logically have capped his oath with the sacred vow familiar to British coronations.

One final piece of evidence endorses the credibility of Irving's account. On March 2, 1801, two days before his own inauguration and referring to the act of Congress from June 1789 removing God language from the oath for federal officeholders, Thomas Jefferson posed a curious question to Chief Justice George Marshall, who would be administering the presidential oath: "I would pray you in the meantime to consider whether the oath prescribed in the constitution be not the only necessary to take. It seems to comprehend the substance of that prescribed by the act of Congress to all officers, and it may be questionable whether the legislature can require any new oath from the President." Marshall replied, "That [oath] prescribed in the constitution seems to me to be the only one which is to be administered." I can conceive of no other reason for this exchange apart from Jefferson wishing assurance from Marshall that he would not be required to add the words, "So help me God," to the oath spelled out in the Constitution. Given his firm commitment to church-state separation, Jefferson would have taken this scruple very seriously indeed.

Although every other piece of Irving's account of the swearing-in ceremony is confirmed by contemporaneous testimony, we may never know for sure that Washington made the vow, "So help me God," when he was inaugurated. In either case, the nation's first great state occasion, from the "reverential manner" in which Washington bent down to kiss the Bible to the Te Deum that closed inaugural worship, was laden with religious portent.

## APPENDIX NOTES

Several writers argue eg. Matthew Goldstein, “Myths of the Oath of Office,” WASHline, May, 2006,” [www.wash.org](http://www.wash.org).

“The chancellor” Washington Irving, George Washington: A Biography, 651-52.

“well-researched” Andrew Burstein, The Original Knickerbocker: The Life of Washington Irving (New York, 2007) 323.

“the scene was” Federal Gazette, 8 May 1789; cf. Jedidiah Morse, American Geography (London, 1794) 2: 271-72.

“I rejoice in” David Humphreys, Pennsylvania Mercury, 9 May 1789; reprinted in Philadelphia’s Federal Gazette, 9 May 1789.

“I, \_\_\_\_\_, a representative” J. L. Bell, [www.boston1775.blogspot.com/2006/10/swearing-into-office-so-help-me-god.html](http://www.boston1775.blogspot.com/2006/10/swearing-into-office-so-help-me-god.html).

“I would pray” TJ to John Marshall, 2 March 1801, PTJ 33: 119.

“That prescribed in” John Marshall to TJ, 2 March 1801, PTJ 33: 120.