

# Putting God Back in the Jeremiad: The Two Futures Project and the Argument for Nuclear Abolition

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**Abstract:** *With new attention provided in recent years to the cause of nuclear disarmament, some evangelical Christians are attempting to energize Christians to join the cause. Although the leader of the Two Futures Project, Tyler Wigg-Stevenson, employs jeremiadic arguments, his rhetoric contradicts the claims of some scholars that the modern jeremiadic rhetorical form has become secularized. This study analyzes the rhetoric of Wigg-Stevenson to determine how he uses references to God and scriptures to construct and strengthen his jeremiad and how he attempts to convince his audiences that they should view the topic of nuclear weapons from a religious perspective. Implications are offered concerning the modern jeremiad and how this rhetorical form should be conceptualized and analyzed by scholars.*

The cause of nuclear abolition has recently experienced something of a revival, achieving its strongest presence on the American political consciousness in two decades. The abolitionist group International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War—which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985—began a new effort in 2006 known as the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. In 2007, several former U.S. officials with foreign policy expertise started working together to urge U.S. leaders to work toward eliminating nuclear weapons. The group included Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, and Sam Nunn. In 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev recommitted the two nations to reducing their nuclear stockpiles and Obama cancelled the proposed U.S. missile shield. Months later, Obama won the Nobel Peace Prize in large part

because of—as the official citation declared—his “vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons” (Gibbs & Stolberg, 2009, ¶31). For the 2009-2010 academic year the Cross Examination Debate Association debate topic was on nuclear disarmament, which led the next generation of policy makers to seriously consider the issue. Also in 2009, a new organization began to target one influential segment of the U.S. population—evangelical Christians—in hopes of changing opinions toward favoring nuclear abolition. This group, the Two Futures Project, frames the issue not merely in economic and security terms but also in strong religious terms by depicting the cause of eliminating nuclear weapons as a moral responsibility and a biblical mandate.

The Two Futures Project was founded by thirty-one-year-old Tyler Wigg-Stevenson, a Baptist minister who was working on nuclear policy before his conversion to Christianity. The effort has garnered media attention from outlets such as the *USA Today*, *Washington Post*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, PBS, and numerous Christian publications. As should be expected with anti-nuclear weapon rhetoric, his addresses often warn of impending devastation to the point of even sounding somewhat apocalyptic. Yet, throughout his discourse is a strong message of hope and optimism that nuclear weapons can actually be eliminated and thus nuclear catastrophe can be avoided. Such a message fits within the rhetorical genre scholars often label the “jeremiad.” However, the rhetoric of the Two Futures Project goes beyond the modern jeremiad as typically analyzed in two substantial ways. First, this jeremiad is far from the secularized version scholars have noted in contemporary political discourse as Wigg-Stevenson freely invokes God and interjects biblical admonitions. Second, he not only includes God in the jeremiadic arguments but attempts to justify doing so, as if it might not be natural for such rhetoric to be offered with such a strong religious tone. This study analyzes the rhetoric of Wigg-Stevenson and the Two Futures Project in light of scholarship on the jeremiad in order to determine how references to God and scriptures are worked back into a rhetorical form that has been secularized.

*SECULARIZED JEREMIAD*

Numerous scholars have explored the jeremiadic genre, which is a rhetorical form derived from Puritan speakers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Johannesen (1985) calls it a genre that “finds a significant place among rhetorical genre studies” (p. 156). With this form, the speaker both criticizes the people for sinning and encourages them as the “chosen” people. Bercovitch (1978) described the structure of Puritan speakers, or “the political sermon, as the New England Puritans sometimes called this genre” (p. xiv):

... first, a precedent from Scripture that sets out the communal norms; then, a series of condemnations that details the actual state of the community (at the same time insinuating the covenantal promises that ensure success); and finally a prophetic vision that unveils the promises, announces the good things to come, and explains away the gap between fact and ideal. (p. 16)

Within this form, “God’s punishments were corrective, not destructive” and God’s “vengeance was a sign of love, a father’s rod used to improve the errant child” (p. 8). Thus, even “their punishments confirmed their promise” (p. 8). A key principle of the jeremiad was the idea that the people were chosen by God and thus God would bless them—especially if they returned to following the covenant more faithfully. Thus, Johnson (2004) noted, “The jeremiad has been distinguished as rhetorical genre not only by its structural components (i.e., construction of promise, explanation of failure to achieve the promise, and resolving prophecy) but also by the particular way in which it defines its audiences” (p. 24). DeSantis (1999) added that the jeremiad not only “is delivered by a speaker who has prophetic insights” but by one who also “is a member of the target community” (p. 72). This is a speech from one member of the “chosen” people to the larger “chosen” community to call the “chosen” people back to their calling.

The jeremiad, then, is at its heart a call for the people to change as it focuses on the “general themes remain sin, repentance, and reform” (Leeman, 2006, p. 225). Bercovitch (1978) noted, “The

American jeremiad was a ritual designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal, public to private identity, the shifting ‘signs of the times’ to certain traditional metaphors, themes, and symbols” (p. xi). Johnson (2004) argued that the jeremiad can be used “in the service of arguments for social change” (p. 19) and noted that “the jeremiad allows rhetors to criticize American society while simultaneously expressing faith in its ideals, resulting in a discourse that is at once separatist and integrationist” (p. 18). Similarly, Murphy (1990) argued that jeremiads “function to transform dissent and doubt about American society into a rededication to the principles of American culture” (p. 402). Yet, the jeremiad is more than just calling for change since “the nature of that called-for change is significant: it always is a return to key values and beliefs” (Buehler, 1998, p. 442). Although jeremiads might at first glance appear to be only negative in tone, they actually “intertwined lamentation of sins and decay with firm optimism, with affirmation of redemption, promise, and progress. Jeremiads often demanded reform of societal problems from within. As Murphy (1990) demonstrated, the jeremiad can be used “to interpret the problems that [face] American society, to provide the audience with an understanding of events, and to suggest the way toward a brighter future” (p. 402). Thus, the power of a jeremiad is that “[e]ven in times of greatest tension” it “affirms the nobility of the American experiment” by providing “a vision of America’s future that is deeply rooted in its most fundamental values” (p. 411). As a result, Bercovitch (1978) saw the argument of jeremiads to be similar to the “process of conversion and sanctification” and the rhetoric used to urge such transformation: “The same prophecies that they used to expound the believer’s way of grace they also used in their political sermons to expound New England’s role in redemptive history” (pp. 42-43).

Bercovitch (1978) argued that “the jeremiad has played a major role in fashioning the myth of America” (p. xi). Ritter (1980) added that the form “helps to define (and redefine) the meaning of the American past” (p. 164). Even though the Puritans have since passed, their rhetorical form has continued. Bercovitch (1978) noted “the persistence of the Puritan jeremiad throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in all forms of literature, including the literature of westward

expansion” (p. 11). Although the form has continued, the “modern jeremiad” is “a secularized form of a jeremiad” (Ritter, 1980, p. 158). With the secularized modern jeremiad, “a civil religion of the American Dream has replaced the Puritan religion” as the foundation for the jeremiadic arguments (Johannesen, 1986, p. 80). Similarly, Murphy (1990) argued:

Modern “Jeremiahs” assume that Americans are a chosen people with the special mission of establishing that “shining city on a hill.” They point to the difficulties of the day as evidence that the people have failed to adhere to the values that made them special, to the great principles articulated by patriots such as Jefferson and Lincoln. The evils demonstrate the need to renew the American covenant and to restore the principles of the past so that the promised bright future can become a reality. (pp. 403-404)

As with the Puritan jeremiad, the focus of the modern version is on the need to repent and reform to avoid disaster. As Johannesen (1986) explained:

The contemporary secular jeremiad depicts present societal ills or calamities as urgent, as requiring action, redemption and reform before it is too late, as representing the verge of impending doom, and as a sign of broken commitments to the fundamental principles of the American Dream. Yet usually America’s straying from the fundamental principles is presented not so much as an irrevocable and fatal error but more as an opportunity for greatness and a test of the national character. (p. 81)

Thus, a jeremiadic rhetor declares that the “current problems will be solved and America still can achieve its destiny of greatness if only citizens (including politicians) will repent and return to the values, principles, and traditions that made them a chosen people” (Johannesen, 1986, p. 81). Scholars have explored various modern jeremiads, such those by Robert Kennedy (Murphy, 1990), Theodore Roosevelt (Buehler, 1998), presidential convention acceptance addresses (Ritter, 1980), Ronald Reagan (Johannesen, 1986; Jones & Rowland, 2005) Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton (Johnson, 2004), conservative politicians of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Sayer & Mills, 2001), the movie

*Saving Private Ryan* (Ownes, 2002), a Dr. Seuss book (Wolfe, 2008), journalist Jenkin Lloyd Jones (Johannesen, 1985), and 19<sup>th</sup> century African-American politician Henry McNeal Turner (Leeman, 2006). A few scholars have also examined more religious jeremiads, such as a sermon by 17<sup>th</sup> century preacher Samuel Danforth (Browne, 1992), a book by Jerry Falwell (Mitchell & Phipps, 1985), and a book by Jim Wallis (Lattin & Underhill, 2006).

### *TWO FUTURES*

In order to consider the jeremiadic arguments of Tyler Wigg-Stevenson and the Two Futures Project, two speeches were considered. The first one was an address by Wigg-Stevenson in April of 2009 at the Q conference, an annual gathering of evangelical Christians to consider pressing issues for church leaders to consider. Speakers have included Chuck Colson, George P. Bush, Bill McKibben, Os Guinness, Francis Collins, Rick Warren, Jim Wallis, Richard Cizik, and numerous top-selling Christian authors. Wigg-Stevenson's address at the 2009 Q conference was the public launch of the initiative (the website was launched that day to coincide with his address) and was voted by attendees to be the best presentation at that year's gathering. The second address examined was a talk that Wigg-Stevenson gave at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. in June of 2009. During this venue, he ventured into the heart of the American civil religion near where the nation's nuclear policy is set. From these two sources, the jeremiadic rhetoric of Wigg-Stevenson and the Two Futures Project is considered.

### *PAST SIN*

Wigg-Stevenson argued during his addresses that the large arsenal of nuclear weapons poses a substantial threat to the nation and the world. In jeremiadic fashion, he even pointed to the time when the nation made the decision that led toward this dangerous path—the Cold War. He blamed “the logic of deterrence” and “the logic of the Cold War” that many people continue to use to justify maintaining a large nuclear arsenal two decades after the end of the Cold War (Wigg-Stevenson,

2009a). He explained, however, that “the security logic of the post-9/11 era is so radically different” since “the conflict that justified that arsenal, that build-up has gone away” (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a). Although his remarks at times suggested that the error was merely continuing the Cold War thinking after the Cold War ended, at other times he took a harder line by arguing that the Cold War logic was problematic even during the Cold War. In particular, he claimed that this approach divided the world between nations with nuclear weapons and those without. He noted that the divide between nuclear nations and those without created diplomatic tensions, especially when the nuclear nations maintain large nuclear arsenals. Thus, he believes that someday other nations will decide to develop nuclear weapons because the U.S. and other nations with nuclear weapons are not following previous commitments to reducing nuclear stockpiles.

Wigg-Stevenson contended that the proliferation of nuclear weapons will open the door for terrorists getting a nuclear weapon. It is at that point that the deterrence policy fails because the “terrorist group can use it with impunity because there’s nobody to bomb back” (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a). This “two-tier system of nuclear haves and have-nots” is therefore a structural problem that must be addressed (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009b). The “balance” of the Cold War no longer works, giving way to “a much more dangerous system” (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009b). Thus, for Wigg-Stevenson, the mistake was not just maintaining the Cold War mentality but even embracing that mentality so strongly during the Cold War. That strategy set the nation—and the world—on the path toward destruction and death. He argued that “our quest for the weapon that will give us ultimate security starts a chain reaction leading to the very process of undermining the goal we sought in the first place” (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a). Ironically, “the weapons that we sought to keep us safe” instead “have become the greatest threat to all of us” (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a). With this argument, Wigg-Stevenson pointed the finger at the American people—particularly governmental officials—for creating the crisis that the nation now faces. As with any jeremiad, the possibility of destruction arises from within; it is the result of the actions of the people that has created the threat, not the work of some outside force.

*PRESENT WARNING*

As a result of the sin of creating a large nuclear stockpile, Wigg-Stevenson argued in his addresses that the U.S. now faced serious threats. Like other Jeremiahs, this destruction is prophesied as a natural consequence of the people's own actions, a punishment for the people's past and present mistakes. He argued that "if we maintain our present course," then our future will be "one where a nuclear bomb has been used" (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a). For prophetic flare, during his speech at the Q gathering in Houston, he showed not only a video warning of the potential devastation but also a map of the blast zone that would occur if a nuclear weapon was detonated from the building where the conference was being held to demonstrate how far away people would be killed. He warned that in addition to human loss of life, the political and economic panic that one nuclear detonation would cause could be "the single greatest evaporation of wealth in modern times" (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a). He added that charities would be particularly devastated by a loss of revenue. Thus, in the time when relief organizations would be needed the most, the resources would not be available to support them.

In the scenario that Wigg-Stevenson paints with detail—and at the Q conference with graphics—the impact of a nuclear blast ripples out well beyond the blast zone. He argued that regardless of where an explosion occurred, the entire world community would be disrupted by a terrorist detonation of a nuclear bomb: "This blast is an act of terrorism against humanity itself because there's not a single square-inch and there's not a single person on the planet whose life this doesn't directly impact" (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a). With this argument, Wigg-Stevenson warned his audience that they were not safe from the impending danger; there was not safe place to hide, no bunker to flee to in hopes of avoiding the consequences of the nation's nuclear policies. A single blast even in another nation would destroy the global economy, bring international travel and distribution to a standstill, and spark violence around the world. One cannot escape the judgment. As Jeremiahs always warn, the only hope is for the people to change their ways before it is too late.

*FUTURE HOPE*

Wigg-Stevenson the modern Jeremiah did not just prophesize about doom; he also offered hope for the people by explaining how the devastation could be avoided. Even the name of his organization speaks to this dual message of punishment and hope by explaining that there are two distinct paths for the people to choose between: “We face two futures—a world without nuclear weapons or a world devastated by them” (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009b). He also declared that which future came to be was dependent on what the people of the nation decided to do: “We have two futures in front of us and we still have time, probably, to pick which one we want” (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a). Although he warned that the time to repent was quickly running out, he nonetheless held out hope that reform could prevent the predicted punishment. Thus, Wigg-Stevenson urged his audience to commit to take action: “Before we collectively sink into a sort of paralyzed detached despair, there is another option . . . and it’s simply this: a world without nuclear weapons, a world free of nuclear weapons” (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a). For those concerned by the dire predictions he had just offered, he now held out hope. He acknowledged that such a quest “sounds like a fantasy” and the dream of “tie-dyed utopian hippies,” but argued that it was “plausible” (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a).

Wigg-Stevenson noted, however, that such a hope was dependent on the people in his audience working to change the nation’s current policies. In jeremiadic fashion, the whole point of his addresses was to motivate his audience members to take action. He called on his audience “to be a wind that pushes this along” (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a). He also argued that how the people acted would be the true test of their beliefs, insisting that “our actions or inaction will answer” the question of what “we really care about” (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009b). Thus, the people will demonstrate their commitment or lack of commitment to American ideals by how they decide to act on this issue. What makes the rhetoric of Wigg-Stevenson different than many modern Jeremiahs is that he did not stop after discussing the past sins, delivering the present warning, and pointing to a future hope. After developing these arguments, he then rhetorically turned to God.

*RELIGIOUS ADDITIONS*

During both of his addresses, a large portion of the jeremiadic arguments were developed in a secular fashion with no reference to God or scriptures. In fact, during his inaugural address for the organization at the Q conference, he did not mention religion until about halfway through his remarks. With both speeches, it seemed he developed the jeremiad in the secular form that scholars have noted in contemporary society and then went back through the arguments to add a religious layer. As he made this transition during the Q gathering speech, he noted:

There's not an ounce of Jesus in anything I just said. An atheist could agree to what I've just said as readily as any Christian because you don't need a personal relationship with Jesus not to want to be blow up and you don't need a personal relationship with Jesus not to want to blow other people up. (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a)

He then added, "So the question is what do Christians uniquely bring to the table with this issue?" (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a). He quickly answered that Christians "bring a unique vocabulary" and "bring a unique sense of possibility" (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a). Thus, he argued that Christians could "be agents of redemption in the world" and bring change that others—including "nuclear technicians" or "expert diplomats"—cannot (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a). After already attempting to persuade his audience that the nation had taken the wrong course and reform was needed to avoid serious destruction, Wigg-Stevenson then added that Christians in particular should lead the nation toward the hopeful future and away from the catastrophic one.

Yet, much of his discussion of the religious case for nuclear abolition seemed designed to convince his audience that they should see the issue as a religious one and not merely an important security and economic issue. He claimed that only by thinking about these issues from a theological perspective can one "get to the truth of what we're talking about" (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a). He added that not thinking about nuclear weapons in religious terms means "you don't see the face of Christ staring back," which he argued is "the only way

you can realize the kind of evil that we threaten to enact if we continue on this path” (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a).

Wigg-Stevenson argued that the potential consequences from a nuclear attack are not just statistics but represent the killing of “lives that are each made in the image of God” and the destruction of land “that was shaped by the Creator’s hand for flourishing” (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a). He added that such a bomb would not only kill people and destroy creation but also significantly harm Christian ministry efforts: “And when a bomb like this goes off, nobody’s interested in digging wells in Africa anymore. So everything else we care about, every good work that the church is called to, goes off the table” (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a). Thus, he hoped his Christian audience members would be concerned about the issue for yet another reason.

With this religious tone adding to his already developed jeremiadic message, Wigg-Stevenson recast the problem of massive nuclear arsenals as not merely a policy mistake but a spiritual sin that demonstrates how far God’s people have fallen:

We were made to tend a creation, to tend a garden and we’ve built a device that could destroy it. This is an act of blasphemy. ... You cannot be someone kneeling before the cross and simultaneously say ‘I hold this level of power over future generations, over this many people, over a spectrum of time.’ The Lord reigns, says the psalmist, let the nations tremble. It’s not the other way around. And we have to recognize that these things are in fact sin. (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a).

Referring to a bomb’s potential blast range that he had projected on a screen behind him, he argued, “This is sin. This is the devil’s cigar stubbed out on the earth. And when you know it to be sin, the decision is made up” (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a). With this religious frame added to the issue, Wigg-Stevenson left his audience with the options of either following his proposal or being unfaithful to God. Yet, he also used pointed to God to provide hope—and not just condemnation—for his audience. Answering the objection that nuclear abolition is impossible, he stated:

As Christians, our sense of possibility isn't determined by what we can see around us, but it's established by what God did at the cross and promises in the coming Kingdom. And so to label something that you think is righteous as 'impossible' is actually an act of cowardice and faithlessness in the redeeming power of God. (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009a)

He also declared that those who came to listen to him and consider the issue were "reaping treasures in Heaven" (Wigg-Stevenson, 2009b). As a result of the inclusion of religious arguments, Wigg-Stevenson transformed his secularized jeremiad into a religious one that increased the seriousness of the breaking of the covenant and the potential consequences while also adding an increased level of motivation and hope for the future.

### CONCLUSIONS

When Wigg-Stevenson utilized the jeremiadic form to make the case for the Two Futures Project, his rhetoric deviated from many modern Jeremiahs and therefore offers some important implications for scholars to consider. The use of the jeremiadic form by Wigg-Stevenson undermines claims by some scholars that the modern jeremiad is a secular form. Despite the focus of scholars on secular jeremiads today, the more religious form has not disappeared. Mitchell and Phipps (1985) argued that the secularized version of the jeremiad need not be the only form today. Their analysis of the Reverend Jerry Falwell's book *Listen America* revealed that his jeremiad was closer to that of the Puritans than the newer secular version. The authors insisted that this proves there is still a place for jeremiads based on explicitly religious appeals, contrasting their study with claims made by Ritter (1980) about the modern jeremiad:

Ritter presents the modern jeremiad as a secular form which has replaced Puritan religion with an interpretation of America's mythic past. ... However, Falwell's application seems to disprove Ritter's conclusion that the "modern Jeremiahs" have become so secularized that they have entirely replaced the covenant with the American dream. (p. 60)

Thus, Mitchell and Phipps (1985) argued that although the “application of the jeremiad tradition in such secularized approaches seems clearly acceptable and offers interesting insights, it is perhaps too hasty to conclude that all modern jeremiads function in this manner” (p. 60). In fact, they suggested that adding the religious aspects of the jeremiad was rhetorically powerful and a sign that he was “attempting to regain some of the political influence achieved by those who used the original Puritan jeremiad” (p. 60). This analysis of Wigg-Stevenson supports the contention of Mitchell and Phipps (1985), even though most scholars have failed to heed their reminder. Although the modern jeremiad differs from the Puritan form in important ways, it is more appropriate to speak merely of a “modern jeremiad” than a “secular jeremiad.” As clearly evident by the rhetoric of Wigg-Stevenson, the modern jeremiad can be a religious one.

Although Wigg-Stevenson brought God into his jeremiadic addresses, his remarks were in the modern jeremiadic tradition and not the Puritan one. Unlike Falwell’s rhetoric examined by Mitchell and Phipps (1985), Wigg-Stevenson did not develop his message similar to the Puritan preachers. Instead, his was a modern jeremiad with religious messages added. The importance difference between the Puritan and modern jeremiads is not the presence or absence of religion but the organizational structure. As Ritter (1980) explained:

The modern jeremiad contains the ancient theme and mode of thought of the Puritan form, but the clearly defined pattern of organization is not present. The Puritan jeremiad progressed in a predictable sequence from doctrine (Biblical text), to reasons (an explanation of the covenant), to applications (the people’s sins, God’s punishments, the need for repentance and reform, and the lifting of God’s punishment). (p. 159)

Ritter added that while “the formal organization of the Puritan jeremiad did not change,” the modern version has “no rigid or predictable pattern of organization” and therefore “[t]he jeremiad theme ... is presented as a kind of mosaic” (p. 159). The addresses by Wigg-Stevenson clearly did not follow the Puritan jeremiadic organization pattern, placing his rhetoric within the realm of the modern jeremiad. His arguments of sin,

devastation, and hope were mixed together, and, most importantly, he did not start with the biblical text but completely left God out of his jeremiad until about halfway through. Although Mitchell and Phipps (1985) criticized Ritter and others for treating the modern jeremiad as a secular one, they noted that “[a]s with the traditional Puritan form, Falwell initially bases his arguments on Biblical scripture” (p. 56). Unlike Falwell, Wigg-Stevenson did not keep this Puritan style, as seen most dramatically during his speech at the Q conference when he noted halfway through his remarks that even an atheist could agree with him up to that point. An examination of his speech until that point reveals a truly modern—and even thoroughly secular—jeremiad. His rhetoric was not a return to the Puritan jeremiad but a reminder that the modern jeremiad need not be a secular one. Scholars should be careful not to overly cast the modern jeremiad as a secular one. The “modern jeremiad” should not be considered “a secularized form of a jeremiad” (Ritter, 1980, p. 158) or merely a “secular jeremiad” (Johannesen, 1986). Rather, scholars should recognize that the modern jeremiad is a rhetorical genre that can include religious arguments.

The use of the religious modern jeremiad is important for Wigg-Stevenson because it allows him to connect to his audience as he seeks to create consensus toward nuclear abolition. The power of the jeremiad is, after all, in its ability to unite the people around a common calling. As Bercovitch (1978) noted:

The ritual of the jeremiad bespeaks an ideological consensus—in moral, religious, economic, social, and intellectual matters—unmatched in any other modern culture. And the power of consensus is nowhere more evident than in the symbolic meaning that the jeremiads infused into the term America. (p. 176)

It is because of this ability to create a powerful consensus that rhetors like Wigg-Stevenson turn to the jeremiad. As Jones and Rowland (2005) explained, “Political figures are not required by a rhetorical exigency to make a jeremiadic response. Rather, they choose the rhetorical form of the jeremiad because it is consistent with their objectives and worldview” (p. 160). Since the jeremiad “provides a source of renewal of cultural unity in the midst of political conflict,” it

is “well suited to the needs of political leaders” (Ritter, 1980, p. 171). However, since Wigg-Stevenson was addressing evangelical Christians who look to the faith for guidance on public policy issues, he needed to speak their language in order to truly build consensus around his policy proposals. If he offered a truly secular jeremiad, it would likely be much less successful with his evangelical audiences. Thus, scholars should also consider rhetors who use the modern jeremiad with religious argumentation because it might be that the injecting of religion is what makes those jeremiads more successful. Unlike Falwell, Wigg-Stevenson may not be vying to become an heir of the Puritans. Yet, that should not mean he cannot invoke God as he seeks to become the next modern Jeremiah.

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