

# Onward Townsend Soldiers: Moral Politics and Civil Religion in the Townsend Crusade

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## ABSTRACT

The Townsend Plan was more than a secular pension scheme—a \$200 per month plan for retirees. This article analyzes the organization’s periodical, the *Townsend National Weekly*, to outline the religiopolitical dimensions of “Townsendism.” It first situates Townsendism in American political thought, showing how it drew heavily on “civil religious” symbols that tie the population metaphysically to the nation. Next, it explores how the plan manufactured these symbols. The first symbol was the plan itself, which is treated as gospel, complete with the quality of spontaneous acceptance. The second symbol was Dr. Francis E. Townsend, who members believed channeled a spiritual connection to Abraham Lincoln. This article concludes that Townsendism was a sect of the American civil religion, indicating that the concept is more plastic than traditionally conceived. It suggests that scholars should reexamine our approach to civil religion and moral politics in American political thought more generally.

*Some of our Critics have accused us of exhibiting “an evangelistic fervor”; the accusation is a compliment. Fervor is impossible without sincerity, without consciousness of the rectitude of our purpose, and unwavering confidence in the final triumph of our principles.<sup>1</sup>*

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1. “The Soul of a Nation,” *Townsend National Weekly*, December 30, 1935, 8; emphasis added. I accessed the periodical on the microfilm archived at Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

## 1. GLORY, GLORY HALLELUJAH! GOD'S PLAN IS MARCHING ON

Today scholars remember supporters of the Townsend Plan as key players in the passage of Social Security and the 1936 election.<sup>2</sup> The Old Age Revolving Pension plan (OARP; colloquially the “Townsend Plan”) was simple: a revolving pensions system providing \$200 a month to Americans over 60 who voluntarily retired. It was billed as an end to poverty for the elderly, as well as economic stimulus—and it caught on like wildfire.<sup>3</sup> Even as the administration focused on the American Liberty League, operatives as high as Democratic National Committee chairman James Farley were being warned of the political consequences of ignoring Dr. Francis E. Townsend and his millions of followers.<sup>4</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt saw the political bind into which the organization had placed him, and despite administration attempts to head off Townsend gains by passing the Social Security Act (SSA), membership rolls continued to balloon.<sup>5</sup> By the election, there were some 7,000 clubs, over two million enrolled “Townsendites,” and at least 10 times that number who sympathized with the cause (Holtzman 1975; Amenta 2006).

Past scholarship situates the Townsend Clubs in the context of the 1936 election, and within secular politics more broadly. Contemporary accounts, for instance, from Frances Perkins and Arthur J. Altmeyer, describe only the plan’s political dimensions (Perkins 1946; Altmeyer 1966). Later scholarship follows the same line of argumentation: the organization was a “proto-Keynesian” plan that Roosevelt discredited through the Committee on Old Age Security, representing the advent of old age as a salient political identity (Quadagno 1988; Amenta 2006). To date, the plan has served as a footnote in explaining the evolution of old age security in America.

Yet this secular account is only half of the story. Townsendites lobbied for their pension plan in ways that struck many as religious.<sup>6</sup> Media accounts of the day highlight how plan boosters melded secular message and religious de-

2. The section title is a line from the Townsendite adaptation of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” renamed “Our Plan Is Marching On.” See Dyer (1936).

3. This article analyzes Townsendism as a belief system and examines neither the plan’s organizational structure nor how it spread. For that discussion, see Amenta (2006).

4. Martin F. Smith telegrammed James Farley on October 21, 1935; Stanley High wrote to Roosevelt’s personal secretary, Stephen Early, about a similar warning he received. FDR Presidential Library, POF 1542, Box 1, “Townsend, F.E.”

5. “We have to have [an old age benefit plan]. . . . The Congress can’t stand the pressure of the Townsend Plan unless we have a real old-age insurance system.” Quoted in Perkins (1946, 294).

6. As Steven B. Burg writes, “a well-articulated secular vision of the Townsend movement co-existed with [its] religious strand” and became an extension of members’ religious faith (1999, 208, 210).

livery. The *New York Times* ran articles with titles like “Townsendism: Old-Time Religion,” and journalists present at Townsend national conventions described the gatherings more as religious revivals than political meetings. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. characterized the “atmosphere of the movement [as] less that of pressure politics than of the old-time religion” (1960, 33). As one observer at the 1935 convention remarked, “Politics had assumed a new purpose and meaning to these people—it was interesting, challenging, and inspiring. As pioneers they felt the uplift which comes with subordination of the self to a mighty and righteous cause—not fully understood, but bound to triumph. *The Convention had the aspects of a revival, and the fervor of a religion surged in the minds of the delegates.*”<sup>7</sup> This memo eventually made it all the way to FDR, who passed it on to John G. Winant of the Social Security Board.

This article offers a fresh approach to Townsendism. It argues that the plan gained support by drawing on moral strains of American political thought, and in particular the themes and symbols from the American civil religion (ACR). Specifically, Townsends manufactured two potent religiopolitical symbols. The first, the Townsend Plan, was treated as gospel, complete with the quality of spontaneous acceptance. The second was Francis Townsend, who members believed channeled a spiritual connection with Abraham Lincoln.<sup>8</sup> This article draws on extensive qualitative analysis of 1 year of articles from the organization’s official organ, the *Townsend National Weekly* (January 28 to December 30, 1935).<sup>9</sup> These nearly 800 pages illustrate the pervasiveness of civil religious symbols within Townsendism, revealing it to be an organization that interchanged religious and secular imagery in the pursuit of its elderly pension.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. THE TOWNSEND PLAN IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In September 1933, Dr. Francis E. Townsend wrote a letter to the *Long Beach Press-Tribune* proposing a revolving pension for those over 60. While he originally suggested \$150 per month funded by a national sales tax, the amount was quickly adjusted to \$200 per month paid through a 2% transaction tax

7. Elizabeth Merriam, “Impressions of the First National Convention of Townsend Clubs,” October 24–27, 1935, Stevens Hotel, Chicago, FDR Presidential Library, POF 1542, Box 1, “Townsend, F.E.”; emphasis added.

8. For more secular symbols accruing mystical elements, see Rogin (1979) and Schwartz (1991).

9. The year 1935 was chosen as a natural breakpoint: it captures the organization as its belief system solidified, especially important events such as Townsend’s near death and the first convention.

10. What this article loses in historical breadth, it aims to make up for in depth: while Townsendism existed past the 1936 election, these early years were quite formative.

(Holtzman 1975). These details remained largely unchanged through the end of the first year (Amenta 2006).<sup>11</sup> Soon Townsend Clubs were established across the West, and in response congressmen began introducing versions of the plan; John S. McGroarty (D-CA) sponsored the most famous of these, H.R. 3977, in January 1935. Yet neither the Ways and Means Committee nor Congress at large took the McGroarty bill seriously, and no version of the Townsend Plan ever passed Congress.<sup>12</sup> Instead, FDR signed the SSA (1935), which covered Americans 65 years and older with matching federal/state funds up to \$15 per month.<sup>13</sup>

Insofar as the Townsend Plan was a policy response to the Great Depression, it was ostensibly secular. By the middle of November 1929, the Dow Jones had lost nearly half of its value, and by 1933 the nation's gross domestic product had fallen to \$56.4 billion (down from \$103.6 billion in 1929; Bureau of Economic Analysis 2011; Richardson et al. 2013). Experts generally condemned the plan, and for most Americans this is where support ended. The numbers did not add up: the plan would cost \$24 billion—half of the previous year's national income—and would precipitate inflation on par with that in Weimar Germany (Amenta 2006).

Townsendites engaged these economic concerns head-on. Editions of the *Weekly* are filled with statistics, as well as talk of the “velocity of money” moving through the economy. Quadagno and others rightly identify the organization's Keynesianism: Townsendites dreamed that money would “cycle” through the economy quickly enough to pay for the monthly \$200 pension.<sup>14</sup> In turn, this would prime the economic pump and help the United States spend its way to prosperity. They were so keen on justifying the plan economically that they ad-

11. An April 1935 version of the McGroarty bill suggested additional taxes to supplement the 2% transaction tax: a 0.1% increase in the income tax, and a 2% tax on inheritance and gifts valued at more than \$500. These modifications were downplayed, emphasizing how the plan remained unchanged. See “Powerful Congress Support for New Measure Predicted by Clements in Interview,” *Townsend National Weekly*, April 8, 1935, 1.

12. However, the plan did, as Amenta (2006) argues, have qualified success.

13. The apocryphal version of the plan's genesis is equally illuminating. One morning, Dr. Townsend saw three elderly women looking for food in the trash outside his house. He became irate, and when his wife pled with him to calm down because the neighbors would hear, Townsend responded that he wanted the neighbors and God to hear: “I'm going to shout till the whole country hears!” Myth dictated that Townsend was struck by the plan in its entirety and then wrote his letter. See Francis E. Townsend quoted in Milney (1935, 2). This tendency toward myth exists elsewhere: Townsend's near death in a plane crash in front of 20,000 Townsendites became legend. The doctor's cry, “Let's have another Plane!” was epitomized as the “Townsend Spirit.” See George B. Alexander, “The Evolution of a Modern Crusader,” *Townsend National Weekly*, September 9, 1935, 14; see also “Dr. F.E. Townsend Crashes,” *Townsend National Weekly*, September 2, 1935, 12.

14. See “Judge Frank Tyrrell Sees Road to Recovery in Plan,” *Townsend National Weekly*, March 4, 1935, 4.

vocated establishing economics groups within and outside of club meetings.<sup>15</sup> While Dr. Townsend lampooned economics as a profession, Townsendites nonetheless cited “endorsements” by economists such as R. R. Doane as proof of the plan’s scientific bona fides.<sup>16</sup> In this respect, the clubs were billed as educatory organizations attempting to popularize the study of economics, and therefore they may look fairly nonreligious.<sup>17</sup>

Evidence indicates, however, that the plan was more than an economic philosophy. Backers dreamed of the day it would pass, putting on plays in anticipation.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, they wrote songs melding both religious and patriotic source material and language.<sup>19</sup> This is unsurprising: scholarship shows that exogenous shocks like economic depression, because of their disproportionate effects on the nation’s vulnerable, may account for sustained national religiosity (Norris and Inglehart 2008, 106–8). William McLoughlin argues that it is social disorder that leads to religious revival, writing that crises produce a prophet who spreads “God’s message,” and who eventually convinces enough people of his or her “vision” to revise society (1978, 18–22). These phenomena apply equally to both secular symbols and religious ones (Swidler 1986). As Robert Stauffer argues, people accustomed to economic stability may “ward off dissent by new appeals to nationalist symbols and myths” during times of crisis (1973, 421–22).

The plan’s confluence of religiosity and push for reform is reminiscent of other twentieth-century movements, the most prominent of which are Progres-

15. “The Next Campaign,” *Townsend National Weekly*, April 15, 1935, 16. One editorial suggested that Townsendites “make programs of study systematic, orderly and carefully planned, especially in economics, a . . . regular routine in all clubs.” See “Self-Discipline,” *Townsend National Weekly*, July 8, 1935, 8.

16. While Doane never explicitly backed the plan, Townsendites nonetheless cite him as an economic authority in their cause. See “R.R. Doane Enlists in Fight Extra: Doane Is Sure Financial Set Up Will Work: Research Clarifies Townsend Figures, Committee Told,” *Townsend National Weekly*, February 18, 1935, 2; “Doane Figures Confirm Townsend,” *Townsend National Weekly*, March 4, 1935, 2; and “Business Economics to Face Trial before Humanity Bar,” *Townsend National Weekly*, May 27, 1935, 9.

17. Robert Nelson (2014) argues that economics can be seen as a religion. Nelson’s argument is well taken, but I would argue that Townsendism represented a different dimension of Progressive Era thought: one affected by the energies of the “Secular Great Awakening” but that ridiculed the profession Nelson analogizes to the priesthood.

18. See *Townsend National Weekly* for ads: “Ma’s Passion,” “The Happy Pension Play,” “Dreamers Triumphant,” and “Silver Threads.” See also “New Play Popular,” *Townsend National Weekly*, March 25, 1935, 13.

19. The 1936 convention songbook includes 66 songs, ranging from the religious, to popular culture, to the patriotic. Adaptations of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” and “Marching through Georgia” appear throughout (eight and seven versions, respectively). The compilation also includes three versions of “Onward Christian Soldiers,” as well as a rousing adaptation of “That Old-Time Religion.” In each case, the operative words—either religious or patriotic—have been replaced with accolades for the Townsend Plan, its originator, or both.

sivism and the Social Gospel tradition. Like Progressives, club members believed that fixing economic inequality was a national, moral priority. They also believed that technological innovation could cure social ills and that improving public education was integral to improving standards of living.<sup>20</sup> Like those in the Social Gospel movement, Townsendites worried that the nation was descending into moral chaos—most easily represented by alcohol, less stringent sexual mores, and a generally lazy youth.<sup>21</sup>

Still, there are critical differences. While Townsendites may have been influenced by Progressivism, boosters were not Progressives: that movement was prominent in eastern cities among an educated elite, whereas Townsendism drew from the West and rural Midwest and, on average, members were not wealthy (Amenta 2006, 119). While both pushed for a moral politics, Progressivism remained a political ideology concerned with an array of secular changes (e.g., the income tax or direct election of senators), whereas Townsendism was less a political ideology and more a single-issue organization. Townsendism should similarly be distinguished from the Social Gospel tradition. While both were religious, the Townsendites channeled their religiosity into a single piece of legislation: only it was God-given, and no other old age pension would do. This is substantively different from prohibition or suffrage, which did not seek to sanctify a single symbol but rather pushed for more general moral reform (Morone 2003). The difference between Townsendism and these movements is not what motivated them, but rather to what ends they put those motivations.

The Townsendites' America drew on the moral dimensions of American political thought we still recognize today. National politics stressed covenants, adopted the jeremiad to lament the nation's lost past, and carved out a moral "us" from a licentious "them" (Morone 2003). It was a mystical and spiritual politics: for one ardent believer, it was obvious that the United States was part of "a spiritual world; a world of unfolding."<sup>22</sup> To *Weekly* editor in chief Frank Elgin, the plan looked foolish only to those who lacked belief: "Spiritual things must be spiritually discerned," he argued.<sup>23</sup> To many Townsendites the political and spiritual recoveries were indistinguishable.<sup>24</sup>

20. Key to Townsendism was the idea that America had solved the problem of production and now needed to increase consumption. Townsend himself was heavily influenced by Edward Bellamy's utopian novel *Looking Backward*.

21. See "Townsendism: Old-Time Religion: Its Aged Followers Burn with Honest Zeal to Recapture the American Tradition of Opportunity and Security for Those Who Are 'Good,'" *New York Times*, March 8, 1936.

22. Frank H. Bascom, "Plan to Win When Nation Opens Eyes," *Townsend National Weekly*, December 16, 1935, 2.

23. Frank Elgin, "Hits and Mrs.," *Townsend National Weekly*, January 28, 1935, 1.

24. C. L. Bostwick claims that "the spiritually abundant life is closely related to and cannot be divorced from the normally abundant material support." See C. L. Bostwick, "Plan

### 2.1. TOWNSENDISM IN AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT: COVENANTS, US AND THEM, AND JEREMIADS

In the United States many treat the Constitution as more than a secular document. It inherits the mystical qualities emphasized in biblical covenants (Elazar 1988, 1998). Violations of the social contract offend not only the signatories—the people and their government—but God as well. In America, breaking a contract opens the possibility of divine justice. Townsendites believed that the social contract had been torn asunder and that, God as their witness, it would be put right. The plan would succeed not because it was sound economically, though they believed vehemently that it was, but rather because it had to. It was only right that it should succeed and bring back an America long ago promised and in many cases stolen from the elderly.<sup>25</sup> A *New York Times* article captures this dilemma, arguing that Townsendism was not a call to radicalism, but was “simply the means of redeeming the promises of the little red schoolhouse.”<sup>26</sup> The Townsendites’ America was one where moral living was rewarded, and where God was the final arbiter.

One noteworthy observation is that Townsendite reverence for the social contract did not translate into worship of the Constitution. At least in the run-up to 1936, plan boosters ceded this ground to the American Liberty League.<sup>27</sup> Like the Progressives, Townsendites believed that the Constitution embodied admirable ideas but was in important ways incomplete.<sup>28</sup> To fulfill America’s promise, the people had to be willing to change the “sacred” charter. The plan was the only change that would preserve the spirit of constitutional government.<sup>29</sup> While Townsendites clearly revered constitutional government, boosters rejected blind worship of the Constitution “as is.” The plan was just as powerful a symbol as Max Lerner’s totemic Constitution, and it fulfilled precisely the same function of restoring order (Lerner 1937, 1294).<sup>30</sup>

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Seen as Aid to All Classes, Not Bid for Life of Luxury,” *Townsend National Weekly*, December 2, 1935, 2.

25. “Restitution,” *Townsend National Weekly*, April 1, 1935, 16.

26. “Townsendism: Old-Time Religion.”

27. “Rights in America,” *Townsend National Weekly*, April 22, 1935, 16.

28. Townsendites did not see the Constitution like Garrison—as a “devil’s pact.” See “Taking the Back Trail,” *Townsend National Weekly*, May 20, 1935, 16. “We are in a new world today,” the editors claim, and “old standards, precedents, even national experience, do not aid us in properly appraising the situation. On the contrary, they fog our vision and confuse our reasoning.” See also Frank Tyrrell, “Progress and Prospects,” *Townsend National Weekly*, June 10, 1935, 8–9.

29. See “Clements Comments on Supreme Court Decision,” *Townsend National Weekly*, June 10, 1935, 8.

30. Townsendites mirrored the “Pledge of Allegiance” with their “Townsend Pledge,” which closed meetings along with patriotic songs. It therefore compliments, rather than competes with, traditional Americanism. It states, “The Townsend Plan must succeed. I therefore



Secondly, Townsendism created a righteous “us” and a dangerous “them.” James Morone and others root this phenomenon in religious politics: a pious dry America versus the licentious wets, or righteous abolitionists against evil slaveholders (Morone 2003; Sehat 2011). Yet America’s ecumenism also allows a generic religious rhetoric that removes discourse from purely religious arenas and facilitates its application to other realms. As Christopher B. Chapp argues, many civil religious appeals are framed as in-group appeals (2012, 50). There is a natural fit therefore between religious language meant to be inclusive (civil religious “belief in belief”) and rhetoric that carves out moral communities. Specifically, Chapp writes that inclusive pronouns like “us” or “our” create the community, and exclusive ones like “them” or “their” set its boundaries (see also Acton and Potts 2014).

The rhetoric of inclusion and exclusion is one of the plan’s most conspicuous dimensions. Townsendites divided the United States into three camps: those for the plan, those who would be for it once they “knew” it, and those who would forever be opposed to it. It was only ever “our” plan—and it would win:

No, my friends, *we* do not have to live, but *this* Cause for which *we* are crusading must live, and triumph, cost what it may! *We’ll* give to it till *we* feel it, and then give till *we* cease to feel it—till the exquisite pain has numbed the nerves. No matter how slender the purse or weak the flesh, the spirit is willing! The enemies of social justice are sitting luxuriously in *their* gilded entrenchments, laughing at the tattered and necessitous army. . . . Are you going to lie down and thus fulfill *their* expectations? Such is not the character of crusaders.<sup>31</sup>

Townsendism organized the world into opposing factions. Members oriented all aspects of their life around support/opposition to the plan: whom they married, bought products from, or even associated with. If “we” were going to be victorious, Townsendites were led to believe, the front must be united; it was an emphasis on unity that sometimes bordered on neurosis. Dangers came not only from outside the organization but also often from within: “Let us make these little flurries in *our* ranks the occasion for solidifying *our* forces, survey-

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pledge my allegiance to its principles, its founders, its leaders and to all loyal co-workers, and rededicate myself to maintain the democratic form of government in America.” “First Gathering on District Plan on Memorial Day,” *Townsend National Weekly*, June 10, 1935, 1.

31. Frank G. Tyrrell, “Townsend Movement Likened to Crusades by Tyrrell in Inspiring Address on Radio,” *Townsend National Weekly*, June 10, 1935, 12; emphasis added. See also D. S. Welch, “No Words for Failure in Club’s Lexicon,” *Townsend National Weekly*, May 20, 1935, 13.



ing anew *our* great task, and rekindling *our* faith and zeal. Every desertion can be capitalized to the strengthening of *our* forces, as when the treason of Benedict Arnold moved Washington to issue the order, ‘Put none but Americans on guard tonight!’”<sup>32</sup> The *Weekly* peppered readers with stories of defection—painting the plan as forever under fire for its righteous beliefs.<sup>33</sup> Yet, pronoun use does not necessarily a civil religion make. After all, secular American politics distinguishes “us” (i.e., Republicans) from “them” (i.e., Democrats), and these categories are not religious.

In-groups and out-groups are important not in and of themselves, but for how individuals moved between the categories. Boosters used the language of conversion, which hinged on an individual’s ability to accept “the Truth” of the Townsend Plan.<sup>34</sup> This made vilifying opponents easy. To not know of the plan was one thing, but to read Townsend’s proposal and still oppose it was a choice, and an indication that someone was spiritually defective.<sup>35</sup> “The day of ignorance is fast receding,” wrote one Townsendite to the *Weekly*, “and the time is near when we shall know the truth, and the truth shall make us free.”<sup>36</sup> The peculiar thing is that the truth in question was not religious, and it was certainly not specifically Christian—yet Townsendites expressed it religiously. Accepting Townsendism was the outward manifestation of salvation: once someone conceded that the plan’s transaction tax would be sufficient to fund the pension scheme, “they’[d] be converted,” says the Reverend C. L. Morgan, “*if they [were] honest.*”<sup>37</sup> Even as fidelity was to a secular plan, the language and the moral fervency Townsendites expressed suggest a decidedly religious attachment to it.

Finally, there is Townsendism’s use of the political jeremiad to frame its message. This religiopolitical trope has been a facet of the American lexicon

32. Frank G. Tyrrell, “Tyrrell Pays Tribute to Leaders in Radio Address,” *Townsend National Weekly*, May 20, 1935, 12; emphasis added. See also Frank Elgin, “Hits and Mrs.,” *Townsend National Weekly*, May 20, 1935, 1.

33. See Merrit B. Hale, “Unity in Ranks Is Cited as Essential,” and Loretta Adams, “Warns That Divided Forces Mean Defeat,” *Townsend National Weekly*, June 10, 1935, 13.

34. Ray B. Compton, “Club Members Reminded of Duties Which Are Cited as Essential to Plan Success,” *Townsend National Weekly*, June 24, 1935, 1. See also O. A. Featherston, “Explains Conversion to the Townsend Plan,” *Townsend National Weekly*, November 4, 1935, 23; and “An Editor Sees the Light,” *Townsend National Weekly*, October 21, 1935, 3.

35. “Only ignorance, prejudice or willful stupidity” could account for opposition to the plan. James T. Walter, “On the Spot,” *Townsend National Weekly*, January 28, 1935, 4; see also W. C. Carpenter, “Speaker Commends Attitude of Paper,” *Townsend National Weekly*, April 22, 1935, 10, where the author claims that only “ignorance or prejudice” explains opposition.

36. Bert Kissinger, “Better Days to Dawn as Result of Plan,” *Townsend National Weekly*, May 20, 1935, 13.

37. C. L. Organ, “A Social Gospel,” *Townsend National Weekly*, 15 February 1935, 12; emphasis added.

since the seventeenth century, so its presence in Townsendite rhetoric is unsurprising (Bercovitch 1978; Murphy 2009). Nonetheless, it suggests a melding of the religious and political realms where the political community is synonymous with a moral one. The *Weekly* often highlights America's national sins, and while sometimes the community's evil deeds were nondescript, more often than not the offense was exploitation and economic slavery. Just as the Civil War was punishment for racial slavery, now the price was Depression.<sup>38</sup> Each time Townsendites claimed there was but one way out of the crisis. *Weekly* contributor F. Von Rossdell Mayer's picture is emblematic: "The nation today stands before a Red Sea. Behind are the compelling forces of Depression, of Chaos, of disaster. The other shore is visible, bathed in the sunshine of national prosperity. . . . The people can see the path opening through that Red Sea. They have a leader, who has shown them the way. That leader is Dr. F. E. Townsend; the passage across that Red Sea is the way of the Townsend Old Age Revolving Pension Plan."<sup>39</sup> The Townsend message was that rampant capitalism corrupted the nation: had Americans maintained the Puritan founders' moderation, all would have been well.<sup>40</sup>

As terrible as the Depression was, the future after national repentance through the plan was equally bright. The plan would end this and all future depressions.<sup>41</sup> It represented an end to public charity, the almshouses, and prisons: the United States would be cured of all social ills.<sup>42</sup> Townsendites truly believed that the plan would usher in a new era—of humanitarianism, economics, and politics—and a spiritually pure America.<sup>43</sup> The nation should fall to its knees and thank God for a plan that "assures the beginning of a new era, an era which accepts the brotherhood of man as the great motive for human progress."<sup>44</sup>

38. John C. Kraus, "The Fountain of Living Waters," *Townsend National Weekly*, February 4, 1935, 12.

39. F. Von Rossdell Mayer, "The Way to the Promised Land," *Townsend National Weekly*, April 1, 1935, 12.

40. "Return to Fundamentals Is Urged in Plea for Pensions by Noted Economic Expert," *Townsend National Weekly*, April 8 1935, 1 and 13.

41. Clinton Wunder, "Wunder Extols Townsendites for United Front," *Townsend National Weekly*, November 4, 1935, 4.

42. Walter, "On the Spot"; Clinton Wunder, "Radio Address," *Townsend National Weekly*, January 28, 1935, 6; "Taxes and Charity," *Townsend National Weekly*, August 5, 1935, 8; R. A. Crossman, "The Voice of the People," *Townsend National Weekly*, August 12, 1935, 14; Isidoro Armijo, "Townsend Inspired Philosophy," April 29, 1935, 15.

43. "Sees New Social Era Coming with Plan's Adoption," *Townsend National Weekly*, June 10, 1935, 11; George Highly, "New Economic Era Called Goal of Plan," *Townsend National Weekly*, November 4, 1935, 9; W. G. Jefferson, "Townsend Plan and the Golden Rule," *Townsend National Weekly*, December 23, 1935, 6.

44. John Randolph Priess, "Retailers Declared Mighty Influence When Won to Plan," *Townsend National Weekly*, June 3, 1935, 9.

Even as the Depression catalyzed greater theistic religiosity, it led some citizens to meld religious and secular worldviews. As other Americans were citing the Constitution as a way to bring back prosperity and stability, the Townsends created their own symbol: Townsend's "Old Age Revolving Pension Plan." They believed that the plan would repair the torn covenant between the people and government, and furthered it through appeals to moral tropes in American political thought.

### 3. TOWARD A CIVIL RELIGION OF THE TOWNSENDITES

Over the years, the ACR has meant many things. For Robert Bellah, it was simply the constellation of "beliefs, symbols, and rituals" that attach a people to the state in a metaphysical sense (1967/2005, 42).<sup>45</sup> As Townsendism is most noteworthy for its creation of symbols, that is where this article focuses.<sup>46</sup>

Americans have a history of sacralizing texts and worshipping ancestors. Exploring Townsendism as a potential civil religion requires a background in this process. First, many Americans sanctify the Constitution: with every crisis, they are encouraged to recommit to its principles in order to expedite our return to prosperity (Lerner 1937; Kammen 1986; Balkin 2011). Owing to the nation's Puritan origins, recurrent Protestant Awakenings, and individual levels of religiosity, constitutional interpretation in America both resembles and often feeds on biblical literalism (Grey 1984; Elazar 1998; Crapanzano 2000; Pelikan 2004). The second set of symbols is the catchall category "ancestors," generally reserved for the founders and noteworthy presidents (Albanese 1976; Pierard and Linder 1988). Great Americans such as Washington and Lincoln are apotheosized in word and art, and men such as Madison and Jefferson are mythologized as the authors of our treasured documents. They become symbols around which future generations rally, divorced from historical debates (Sehat 2015).

Townsendism both adopted and adapted these elements of the ACR. Townsends deified Dr. Townsend through comparisons to Abraham Lincoln, and in place of sacralizing the Constitution, Townsends sanctified their own text. In creating these symbols, the organization drew on four core themes of the

45. Bellah later disavowed the term, an evolution occurring between "Civil Religion in America" (1967), *The Broken Covenant* (1975), and "Public Philosophy and Public Theology in America Today" (1986). I use "civil religion" because (1) it, Bellah aside, remains the preferred scholarly term; and (2) Bellah's move toward "public philosophy" seems more due to his perception that some social scientists believed that their studies were "quasi-natural science," not (as Bellah believed) a "social self-understanding" (Bellah 1986, 91). As the present study does not share Bellah's personal opinions of social science research, it opts for the more established "civil religion."

46. For more on the past political philosophers who have discussed the concept—from moderns to contemporary theory—see Beiner (2011).

ACR. These were the belief (1) in a denominationally nonspecific (though assumed Protestant) God, (2) that God guides the fate of the nation, (3) that national survival is linked to the survival of democracy, and (4) that the United States should help spread democracy around the world.

### 3.1. TOWNSENDISM FITS TRADITIONAL DEFINITIONS OF THE ACR

The first theme that Townsendism tied with its symbols was belief in a denominationally nondescript “God.”<sup>47</sup> Even as plan boosters were extremely religious and were themselves (largely) evangelical Protestants (see Amenta 2006, 45–46, 119), they were also careful not to threaten group cohesion by claiming to represent any one God. The *Weekly* called repeatedly on a common, nonsectarian God to guide the crusade. As one editorial put it, the plan was “for all classes, regardless of religious creed, color or race, foreign born or native” and was built on Townsendites’ common and “deep conviction of right and a sincere faith in its ultimate victory.”<sup>48</sup> In fact, the idea that the Townsend Plan appealed across other demographic descriptors—especially religion—dominated the first Townsend national meeting in Chicago.<sup>49</sup> Charles Murdock was perhaps most insistent, writing that the plan embraced everyone regardless of nationality, race, or creed. And yet—and this is crucial—it had to “*be religious to the extent that brotherhood and justice are religious.*”<sup>50</sup> The Townsendite God was therefore neither too Protestant nor insufficiently Christian: boosters read into Townsendism exactly the deity they desired.<sup>51</sup>

47. This is exactly what McLoughlin (1978, 17) predicts: the nation’s “voluntaristic religious and political culture” means that Americans need a prophet who speaks to the majority, “in short, *those whose appeal is interdenominational rather than denominational.*” Townsend and his plan were framed as interdenominationally as possible.

48. “Editor Reminded of Value of Truth,” *Townsend National Weekly*, June 17, 1935, 12.

49. For at least one orator, appeals to pluralism were a response to persecution. Townsendites “became determined to forget party lines and religious differences and to unite into one determined body of militant soldiers working for the common cause of humanity.” See “CONVENTION IS SUCCESS: Millions Hear Broadcast of Simultaneous Rally,” *Townsend National Weekly*, November 4, 1935, 1; and “Publisher Assails Unfair Press Criticism,” *Townsend National Weekly*, November 4, 1935, 7.

50. Charles T. Murdock, “All Requirements to End Depression in Townsend Plan,” *Townsend National Weekly*, June 17 1935, 12; emphasis added. See also Murdock’s “The Townsend Plan Will Cure Depression,” *Townsend National Weekly*, August 19, 1935, 12.

51. For evidence that this civil religious God suffuses Townsendism, see Alice Jennings, “Good Will People for the Townsend Plan,” *Townsend National Weekly*, October 21, 1935, 21; Emma L. Tucker, “Cites Holy Writ in Proving Plan Program,” *Townsend National Weekly*, May 20, 1935, 3; and “Plan Is Mobilizing for Justice,” *Townsend National Weekly*, July 15, 1935, 6.

A second theme of the ACR to which Townsendites appeal is the belief that God guides America's destiny. The Townsendite God was an interventionist deity who heard members' prayers and cared about their suffering. Yet Townsendites not only claimed that God was interested in American politics but also argued that He acted through the plan. It was a "divinely inspired Plan" that should be passed before God's throne for judgment.<sup>52</sup> The *Weekly* repeatedly underscored this belief: Dr. Townsend was the recipient of "revelation,"<sup>53</sup> the Plan was "God-given,"<sup>54</sup> and Townsendites would be victorious because God had chosen sides and "whatever He decrees . . . comes to pass."<sup>55</sup> According to Mrs. Mary T. Banner, anyone who ridiculed the plan because its author was neither a businessman nor a lawyer "forgets that in every age when God selects a messenger for his revelation he chooses a true man, the Master chose humble fishermen, Moses of old was a humble Hebrew and so he today chose a humble Christian, Dr. Townsend, to carry his message to our suffering people and already millions are carrying this banner, it is sweeping the United States as nothing ever did in our history."<sup>56</sup> With both God on their side and "a firm conviction that the Divine mind is guiding the destinies of our nation," Townsendites could never fail in spreading their gospel.<sup>57</sup> To follow any other plan (in particular the SSA) would be to defy the Almighty, courting national ruin. The plan would succeed because it was God's plan. As one frequent columnist put it, the call of *Deus vult* ("God wills it") rang as true in the twentieth century as it did during the Crusades.<sup>58</sup>

To argue that God was behind the plan was one thing, but Townsendites also had to justify why the plan was American. At a time when fears of fascism and communism abounded, plan boosters fell back on a third theme of the ACR: defense of democracy. They claimed that the plan was anything but radical, representing the only policy that would prevent fascism and communism from spreading in America. This was more than pragmatic pivoting: like other Americans with Progressive political beliefs, Townsendites genuinely believed that the plan was democratic.<sup>59</sup> It was democracy in action and therefore rep-

52. Kraus, "Fountain of Living Waters."

53. Armijo, "Townsend Inspired Philosophy."

54. F. Von Rossdell Mayer, "Government by and for the People," *Townsend National Weekly*, January 28, 1935, 3. See also F. Von Rossdell Mayer, "Townsend Plan Seen Essential to Youth," *Townsend National Weekly*, March 11, 1935, 7.

55. Alexander, "Evolution of a Modern Crusader."

56. Mary T. Banner, "Studebaker Report Argument for Plan," August 5, 1935, 5.

57. Charles M. Hawkins, "Final Presentation" at the First National Townsend Convention, *Townsend National Weekly*, November 18, 1935, 7.

58. Tyrrell, "Townsend Movement Likened to Crusades."

59. This is best captured by the movement's constant invocation of Lincoln's ending to the Gettysburg Address. For a good example, see Von Rossdell Mayer, "Government by and for the People."

resented a return to pure Americanism.<sup>60</sup> What is more, the clubs were permanent rather than transient entities, and they would become a mainstay of American politics, ensuring that “we the people” were continually in control of our government.<sup>61</sup> Insofar as America was the land “of the people, by the people, and for the people,” the clubs were its purest manifestation.

Related to the idea that Townsendism would “save” American democracy, boosters argued that the plan represented democracy’s *expansion* throughout the world. It was an appeal to the long-noted trope that America is a “city upon a hill.”<sup>62</sup> Townsendism drew heavily on this theme: when the plan was law, one Townsendite wrote, America would stand as a beacon to the rest of the world.<sup>63</sup> One *Weekly* column suggested that the plan would soon spread to other nations and would end all wars.<sup>64</sup> What is more, many Townsendites worried that England would beat the United States to enacting the plan and thus be freer and wiser than the nation that had originated it.<sup>65</sup>

#### 4. EXPLORING TOWNSENDISM AS A CIVIL RELIGION

Townsendism fits traditional definitions of the ACR, but was it a civil religion in itself? Answering this question requires knowing how Townsendism worked, not simply what it looked like. While the organization’s central symbols—Dr. Francis E. Townsend and his plan—certainly borrow from largely evangelical Christian rhetoric, what arises is a set of symbols apart from the religion that undoubtedly helped express it.

##### 4.1. THE FIRST SYMBOL: THE TOWNSEND PROSPERITY GOSPEL

Both elite and lay Townsendites identified the plan as an expression of God’s will. Frank Elgin repeated this several times in his column, as did Charles T. Murdock. As the latter stated colorfully, hundreds of thousands of Americans “firmly believe that God planted the seed of a divine thought in the soul of this

60. Clubs were “a revival of the old New England ‘Town Meeting,’” in which affairs of government were discussed, the qualifications of candidates were carefully canvassed, and the people wielded actual political power. See “The Town Meeting,” *Townsend National Weekly*, March 18, 1935, 12.

61. See Rev. H. L. Richardson’s speech in “Radio Division,” *Townsend National Weekly*, July 29, 1935, 4.

62. From Jonathan Winthrop’s “Model of Christian Charity” sermon aboard the *Arbella* in 1630. See Bellah (1967/2005).

63. Don Carlos Musser, “Townsend Plan,” *Townsend National Weekly*, February 4, 1935, 2.

64. Ansel McMurtry, “Plan Will Prevent Chaos by Blocking National Collapse,” *Townsend National Weekly*, December 2, 1935, 18.

65. “Will England Beat Us, Editor Wonders,” *Townsend National Weekly*, March 25, 1935, 9.

humble and kindly man.”<sup>66</sup> The plan was alternatively described as divinely inspired,<sup>67</sup> God-given, and God-inspired,<sup>68</sup> with still other variations on this theme.<sup>69</sup> It was so simple, so true, “so easily understood,” wrote one elderly couple, “that *only* Divine inspiration could have framed a plan so lovely.”<sup>70</sup> According to another, it had to be God-sent: hearing Townsendite prayers, the Almighty had sent the plan to establish the land of milk and honey on earth.<sup>71</sup> The Depression had to go, and for millions of Townsendites it was clear that when prosperity returned, it would be because God had ordained it. True victory would come because, to paraphrase one Townsendite hymn, God’s plan was marching on.<sup>72</sup>

This was more than “ceremonial deism,” the Supreme Court’s later term describing public invocations of divine will like the Pledge of Allegiance or “In God We Trust.” The appeals exhibited a moralistic fervor obvious in the language used when discussing the plan. First was the language of certainty: as God’s plan, it would win.<sup>73</sup> There was no room for equivocating. The Townsendite worldview revolved around the eventual passing of the plan. Plays imagined the blissful day on which the plan would become law. Their songs predicted it, like this excerpt from “Our Plan Is Marching On”:

The Townsend Plan is marching—  
It will never know defeat—  
It will vanish want and sorrow  
And will make our years more sweet;  
Heal the dread of our tomorrow’s—  
It will make our lives complete—  
God’s Plan is marching on!<sup>74</sup>

66. Charles Murdock, “Townsend Plan Is Bound to Win,” *Townsend National Weekly*, August 12, 1935, 12.

67. Kraus, “Fountain of Living Waters”; Minnie L. Bishop, “Pledge of Loyalty Sent Dr. Townsend,” *Townsend National Weekly*, May 20, 1935, 13; “United Front Urged for Final Victory,” *Townsend National Weekly*, July 1, 1935, 5; E. C. Johnson, “Youth’s Future Hinges on Plan, Writer Says,” *Townsend National Weekly*, November 4, 1935, 28.

68. “Social Security and Safety,” *Townsend National Weekly*, February 4, 1935, 2.

69. U. H. Rogers, “Unity Essential to Make Plan Success,” *Townsend National Weekly*, September 9, 1935, 5.

70. C. H. and Laura K. Slifer, “Is Grateful for Plan,” *Townsend National Weekly*, March 25, 1935, 9; emphasis added.

71. “Fifty-Five Years of Real Hard Work,” *Townsend National Weekly*, December 2, 1935, 14.

72. See “Our Plan Is Marching On,” in Dyer (1936, 2).

73. As one observer keenly noted, “There are no ‘ifs’ in the lexicon of the true Townsendites.” See “Townsendites Stage Frugal Convention; Seek Out Cheap Lodgings at Cleveland,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1936.

74. “Our Plan Is Marching On”; see Dyer (1936, 2).



And from another adaptation, “On to Victory”:

We have sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat,  
Our boys and girls of 60 years shall never see defeat.  
We are marching on to victory; this watchword new repeat—  
Our Plan is marching on.<sup>75</sup>

Townsend versions of “Battle Hymn” did not focus on God’s general role in American politics. He was not shepherding the nation through war; instead, He was assuring the passage of economic policy. Under this guiding hand, Townsendites were certain that they were “On to Victory.”

In addition to Townsendism’s militant optimism is the belief that it represented “Truth” with a capital T. This interpretation was as influenced by political realities as it was by boosters’ religious backgrounds. In the first sense, Townsendites were responding to overwhelming criticism: some accused them of proposing a “fantastic” and “cock-eyed” plan and being personally selfish and lunatics.<sup>76</sup> One way of rebutting the challenges was to claim that the Townsend cause was unfairly victimized, and one way of framing that argument was, of course, analogizing it to Jesus’s persecution by the Pharisees. Every proponent of change, even the “Great Galilean Economist,” met with resistance at the outset.<sup>77</sup> Just as there were apostles, there was sure to be the occasional Judas—even, in 1936, Robert E. Clements.<sup>78</sup> For the ardent Townsendite political opposition was not something to be overcome, as the plan was already destined for victory. Instead, hostility (internal and external) was evidence that the plan was right. “Let not your hearts be troubled,” wrote Von Rossdell Mayer; “*The truth has ever been vilified by its opponents.*”<sup>79</sup>

It was this emphasis on truth and the certainty in victory that made calling the plan “God’s will” so natural. When religious imagery seemed to fit, Townsendites adopted it. Yet we must not confuse religious expression with their fulfillment of their ultimate goal, which is, of course, passing the plan. To put it simply: it was not true because it was God’s plan; rather, it was God’s

75. “On to Victory”; see Dyer (1936, 4).

76. See, e.g., “Townsend Plan Not ‘Fantastic’ or ‘Cock-Eyed’—National Issue,” *Townsend National Weekly*, February 4, 1935, 4; “Coast Listeners Hear Secretary in Stirring Address,” *Townsend National Weekly*, May 13, 1935, 10; and “Business Economics to Face Trial.”

77. A. Emmerson Eve, “Money Lenders against Plan,” *Townsend National Weekly*, April 22, 1935, 3.

78. Clements was accused of taking too much profit from the *Weekly* and was run out of the organization as a Judas; see Holtzman (1975, 159). For more on Townsendism’s Judases, see “A Judas Revealed,” *Townsend National Weekly*, June 3, 1935, 1; and Frank Elgin, “Hits and Mrs.,” *Townsend National Weekly*, October 14, 1935, 1.

79. F. Von Rossdell Mayer, “Seven Good Points,” February 11, 1935, 12; emphasis added.

plan because it was true. The religious framing may have helped Townsendites express their feelings of certainty, but those frames were the result of certitude; they did not cause it. This distinction is crucial, explaining how Townsendites switched seamlessly between religious and secular analogies. Their political reality was a mystical one where, for instance, opposition to Lincoln was explained by the same aversion to “Truth” as condemnation of Jesus Christ. As one editorial put it, “Our Movement finds its conquering energy, not alone in its justice, its equity, its statesmanship, but in the *same upsurge of cosmic* energy that abolished slavery, emancipated women, and lifted Demos from the long subjugation and silence of serfdom. . . . The stars in their courses fight for [Demos] and with him. He is clothed in invincible might, because he is indisputably right. In his faith we conquer.”<sup>80</sup> This central symbol of Townsendism existed aside from traditional religion. Religious language was merely an effective way of articulating what Townsendites felt in their hearts: that the plan was “True” (see fig. 1). It was politically true, religiously true, and eternally true.

Given that Townsendites saw the plan as “Truth,” it is unsurprising that they would adopt the language of evangelical Christianity. At first, the claims to proselytize the “Townsend Gospel” may appear to show only that Townsendites saw the plan as embodying Christian teachings. To be sure, it does surface when speakers are making a clear religious connection—as when Martin F. Smith highlighted the plan as Christianity in action.<sup>81</sup> For many Townsendites it was the “Plan Jesus Died For,” and the first real application of his teachings in 2,000 years.<sup>82</sup> Yet the notion that the plan embodied key aspects of Christianity is only one of at least three possible meanings for the gospel analogy.

A second dimension was tactical: elites pushed the “gospel” metaphor because it required an “official” voice to disseminate. Those in charge of the *Weekly* felt that maintaining this control was paramount. “Fortify yourself with intimate and detailed knowledge of the Plan,” wrote one *Weekly* contributor, “then become a conversational broadcaster, and send out the light through your neighborhood. By all the arts of gentle, ingratiating persuasiveness, indoctrinate your acquaintances.”<sup>83</sup> When asking boosters to recruit

80. “Rising Tide,” *Townsend National Weekly*, September 30, 1935, 9.

81. “Saturday Morning Session,” *Townsend National Weekly*, November 18, 1935, 3.

82. Howard Franklin Nelson, “Townsend Plan Is Seen as Dominant Economic Influence,” *Townsend National Weekly*, September 9, 1935, 13. Or as one editorial said, “It is just possible that the philosophy scheme of life taught 1900 years ago in Palestine may be the answer” to Depression. See “Youth for Work and Age for Leisure,” February 11, 1935, 12; “Crisis Bids Americans Awaken!,” *Townsend National Weekly*, July 1, 1935, 8; Dr. Thomas C. Clayton, “Plan’s Critics Reactionary, Doctor Says,” *Townsend National Weekly*, September 16, 1935, 4; Bostwick, “Plan Seen as Aid to All Classes.”

83. “Advice of Our Leaders,” *Townsend National Weekly*, April 15, 1935, 8. See also T. Alexander, “Octogenarian Helps with Circus Money,” *Townsend National Weekly*,

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Here's the statement: "The Townsend Plan is the most discussed topic before the entire country."

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But the truth is available.

You can get it week after week in the official Townsend publication, the Townsend National Weekly. Nationally known writers who know their subject give you the Truth, which will set you free. Please remember, there is

### Just One Unimpeachable Source Of Townsend Plan Information

## TOWNSEND NATIONAL WEEKLY

Figure 1. "The Answer!" Advertisement, *Townsend National Weekly*, August 10, 1936, 11

neighbors and loved ones, elites invariably indicated that only the "official news sources" could convert unbelievers. Framing Townsendism as like gospel put the marketing campaign in terms everyone understood. Fearful that a divided front could mean defeat, Townsendites accepted this rather authoritarian framework. One man went so far as calling the *Weekly* the "Melchisedec," or the conduit through which wisdom is handed to the people. And the Townsend Club of Las Cruces suggested that the paper was instrumental in "spreading information that unbelievers need."<sup>84</sup> For loyal Townsendites, the *Weekly* contained truth itself: if they wanted to increase membership rolls, they had to also increase paper readership.

At the mass level, this marketing scheme was effective because of a third dimension to the gospel analogy: it "fit" with the religious spirit pervading club activities. Townsendism was a word-of-mouth campaign, but it looked more like religious conversion than secular pressure politics. The Townsend

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June 3, 1935, 13, who argues that members should preach the Townsend gospel as the apostles did Christ's gospel.

84. "Paper Is Appreciated," *Townsend National Weekly*, April 29, 1935, 9.

Plan was gospel not because of what it said but because of how it worked. It held the power of “spontaneous acceptance.”<sup>85</sup> The popular version was that anyone who came in contact with it was converted immediately.<sup>86</sup> The plan’s ability to convert was not predicated on proving its merit or engaging in political debates, but simply by presenting it as fact.<sup>87</sup> “We don’t have to fight,” claimed Ida May Mair, “we don’t have to struggle, *we only have to know*, that God governs, and as the Townsend Old Age Pension is a righteous movement and can be advanced as much by right-thinking as by right-acting.”<sup>88</sup> As Townsend himself wrote, the plan’s “rapid spread no longer require[d] personal persuasion to enlist new advocates”; instead, the “Truth” was its own argument.<sup>89</sup>

#### 4.2. THE SECOND SYMBOL: DR. FRANCIS E. TOWNSEND, NEW PROPHET AND NEW LINCOLN

Townsendites’ belief that the plan was both true and destined to succeed led them to argue that it had divine origins; and if the plan was a divine revelation, Townsendites required a revelator. That divine messenger was Dr. Francis E. Townsend.

On the surface it may seem that Townsendism simply ascribed divine inspiration to the humble doctor. Townsend’s status as God’s emissary was undoubtedly cast religiously. He was no longer a nameless physician from California: as one poem lovingly addressed him, the doctor was “Our Townsend, prophet, seer, and friend to man.”<sup>90</sup> More than a popular speaker, to average Townsendites the founder became a “plain prophet of the people.”<sup>91</sup> Editors at the *Weekly* similarly presented him as the recipient of divine revelation. Townsend was a new Moses throwing down his rod (the plan) to de-

85. Frank Elgin, “Hits and Mrs.,” *Townsend National Weekly*, July 22, 1935, 1. As Elgin writes, the plan’s “*spontaneous acceptance by the people is proof positive that it is based on Principle*” (emphasis added).

86. Frank Elgin, “Hits and Mrs.,” *Townsend National Weekly*, August 26, 1935, 1.

87. As the editor of the National Headquarters weekly bulletin wrote, the clubs should not engage in debates with other organizations, “because the Townsend Plan does not need any debating.” See Willis Owen, “Warns Clubs against Debates, Politicians,” *Townsend National Weekly*, July 15, 1935, 7.

88. “Loyalty Will Destroy Fear and Discord,” *Townsend National Weekly*, August 19, 1935, 6; emphasis added.

89. As one Townsendite wrote to the *Weekly*, “The truth is its own defense. All we need to do is to state it calmly and sincerely, point it out, call attention to its presence.” See H. Claude Lewis, “Plan Held Crusade for Social Justice,” *Townsend National Weekly*, December 9, 1935, 13.

90. W. J. Lessig, “Autumn Leaves,” *Townsend National Weekly*, February 11, 1935, 7.

91. Parker H. Sercombe, “Nature’s Plan Is Similar to Townsend’s Proposal,” *Townsend National Weekly*, March 25, 1935, 15.

feat the administration's magicians.<sup>92</sup> It was an allusion that the founder himself bolstered.<sup>93</sup>

At the same time, Townsend fit the bill of prophet not simply because his message aligned with the social gospel of the age, but also because of how his message was received. The feelings of victimization leading Townsendites to identify opposition with righteousness may have led them to fixate on those who had been persecuted in the past and proven correct. It was always the lone voice at the forefront of change that was unjustly criticized; it was often "the daring prophet" who was "met with rejection."<sup>94</sup> But who qualified as a prophet? As often as not the figures that Townsendites cited were secular: Christopher Columbus, the Wright brothers, Thomas Edison, Robert Fulton, and others.<sup>95</sup> Just as when defending the plan as God's will, boosters' goal was to demonstrate that truth wins out. For Townsendites, prophets were individuals who were vilified by their own time but proven right by history. Whether these people were religious figures like Jesus or secular ones like Edison was largely beside the point: the salient fact was that these mythical figures persevered through faith in their cause (see fig. 2).

This bleed between sacred and secular symbols is absolutely vital. Americans subscribing to a civil religion arguably perceive the political realm as mystical. In a nation divided between a righteous "us" and licentious "them," political outcomes portend greater spiritual meaning. Accordingly, symbols often perceived as secular—for instance, past presidents—may well smuggle within them a hidden, mystical dimension. In fact, this is how Townsendism highlighted the mystical dimensions of one of America's most beloved political symbols: Abraham Lincoln. No single existing symbol was as important to the plan. Far from depicting a distant figure or cultural touchstone, the Townsendite Lincoln was a living and breathing conduit of political legitimacy. He was not just a secular figure from the nation's past; he was—as boosters conceived of Townsend—an embodiment of humanitarianism, Christian good will, and American democracy all at once (Peterson 1994, 27).

At the most superficial, comparisons between Lincoln and Townsend took the form of physical and personal "similarities." For starters, both were born

92. Frank Elgin, "Hits and Mrs.," *Townsend National Weekly*, January 28, 1935, 1; see also Von Rosdell Mayer, "Townsend Plan Seen Essential to Youth."

93. "Townsend's Eastern Radio Address Heard by Many," *Townsend National Weekly*, March 4, 1935, 6.

94. Frank G. Tyrrell, "Progress and Prospects," *Townsend National Weekly*, February 25, 1935, 3.

95. See J. T. L., "Young Men Dream Dreams, Old Men See Visions," *Townsend National Weekly*, January 28, 1935, 10; "Zero Hour to Fall Soon in This Congress," *Townsend National Weekly*, March 25, 1935, 3; and "Some Never Learn," *Townsend National Weekly*, September 23, 1935, 9.



Figure 2. "Fame and the Dreamers" cartoon, *Townsend National Weekly*, July 8, 1935, 8–9.

in log cabins on the frontier. Furthermore, much as Abraham Lincoln's mythologized persona was as a common rail-splitter, so too was Townsend a humble doctor. In a practice common to political outsiders, Townsendites turned the doctor's status as political neophyte into "the highest praise rather than criticism."<sup>96</sup> Finally, like Lincoln (and Washington) before him, Townsend reluctantly entered politics. So why did Townsendites focus on Lincoln and not Washington? While Americans often link Washington and Lincoln in their imaginations, they ultimately see "Honest Abe" as a more human figure than the austere general (Peterson 1994, 27). Townsend, unlike Washington, was known primarily for his kindness—it was a demeanor that James T. Walter wrote was "not at all unlike that of Abraham Lincoln."<sup>97</sup>

96. "Columnist's Subtle Attack Is Met by Clements Who Cites It as Highest Praise," *Townsend National Weekly*, July 22, 1935, 15.

97. Walter, "On the Spot."



Yet the connection between Townsend and the “Great Emancipator” was more than skin-deep. The shared physical characteristics belied a more fundamental truth: that the two were spiritually linked. Ethel Standiford-Melling’s account of the doctor illustrates this well. Ruminating on Townsend’s magnanimity, she thought back to a picture hanging at home: “Some fleeting comparison puzzled me. After a while, I discovered what it was: *the spirit of Abraham Lincoln seemed to be living again in this gentle physician*. The same absence of self; there was no room for personality; his mind was full of the responsibility of us and our needs; there were no side glances; no suspicion; his whole mind and soul were full of hope and trust, faith and honor. He appeared to feel the full need of a people oppressed by poverty and he realized that he was the lever by which the load would be lifted.”<sup>98</sup> This was no secular interpretation of past or current events, but rather the injection of mysticism into the nation’s shared history. Townsendites constantly tied their mission to this mystical Lincoln—whether it was highlighting the tangential connection that one Townsendite had to a famous portrait of the Great Emancipator, commandeering his birthday as “a most important day” in the history of Townsendism, or simply hanging up pictures of Lincoln in club meetings.<sup>99</sup>

Plan boosters effectively paired Lincoln with Townsend. It was a process similar to, though on a smaller and less permanent scale, how Americans paired Washington and Lincoln after the Good Friday assassination.<sup>100</sup> Still, it was no less potent. The frontispiece of the Townsend Speaker’s Manual depicts all three men with the headline “The Emancipators”: of tyranny, of slavery, and of poverty.<sup>101</sup> It was the use of this title “emancipator,” as well as the fixation on Lincoln’s words, that reveals Washington’s inclusion as, more or less, secondary.

To link their crusade with Lincoln’s moral mission, Townsendites needed to assert that his mission was incomplete. Focusing on emancipation not only made political sense; it retained the moral high ground. Townsendites did this by mirroring Lincoln’s famous speeches, in particular his “House Divided” speech and the Gettysburg Address. Lincoln’s fear that the Union could not

98. Ethel Standiford-Mehling, “A Word Picture of Dr. F.E. Townsend,” *Townsend National Weekly*, November 18 1935, 9; emphasis added.

99. “Lincoln the Emancipator,” *Townsend National Weekly*, February 18, 1935, 1 and 4.

100. The link between Washington and Lincoln was intense and infused with a deep, though vague, religiosity. See *Abraham Lincoln the Martyr Victorious* (John Sartain, 1865), which depicts Lincoln ascending to heaven and meeting an angelic Washington, or a modified *Apotheosis of Washington* (John James Barralet, 1802), with the title figure replaced by Lincoln. There were countless unattributed pieces, including the *Apotheosis of Washington and Lincoln* (1865), handed out weeks after the assassination.

101. “Townsend Speaker’s Manual,” 1935, Charles E. Young Research Library, Special Collections at UCLA, Collection 219, Box 145.



survive “half slave and half free” was as true in the 1930s as it was in the 1860s—even more so. As one Townsendite opined, the nation was in “a much more precarious condition than when these words were [originally] uttered by the great Emancipator.”<sup>102</sup> Recourse to Lincoln’s words can appear secular in isolation. But the Townsendite Lincoln was mystical, a fact obvious not only in the spiritual connection described earlier but also in the “prophetic” Lincoln they quote at length.

The prophetic Lincoln connected a forgotten, prosperous and virtuous America to the seemingly endless chaos of the day. The popular consciousness was filled with stories of Abraham Lincoln’s supernatural powers—how he predicted his own death and so on. Townsendism is filled with such appeals, a phenomenon ignored by previous scholarship. Yet Townsend himself presented such a vision of the Great Emancipator, paraphrasing Lincoln’s fear about the dangers of capitalism run amok: “I see, in the future, a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country. Corporations have been enthroned, an era of corruption in high places will follow, and the money power of the country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people until all wealth is aggregated in the hands of a few people and the Republic is destroyed.”<sup>103</sup> The quotation, now known to be a forgery by pro-labor forces in the 1880s, nonetheless recurs throughout the *Weekly*.<sup>104</sup> As one Townsendite wrote in a letter, Lincoln “saw clearly the very things we are suffering from today.”<sup>105</sup> An editorial critiquing “blind reverence” of the Constitution asserted that even as the founders did not foresee big money corrupting the Republic, Lincoln saw it clearly. These accounts, and others like them, established Lincoln as a modern-day prophet for the Townsend cause. Insofar as Townsend was Lincoln’s successor, a mystical Lincoln naturally implies a mystical Townsend.

This “transitive property of mysticism” is vital. After quoting Lincoln’s prophecy, James T. Walter connected the assassinated president with the organization’s founder. Neither man was a professor, and yet Lincoln prophesied the dangers of capitalism and Townsend’s Plan was the true, “God-given solution” to those very ills.<sup>106</sup> Townsend channeled Lincoln, and to followers the organization’s founder was a “Second Great Emancipator” on par with—

102. Judge G. K. Gilluly, “Country Is at Cross Roads,” *Townsend National Weekly*, February 11, 1935, 1.

103. “Townsend’s Eastern Radio Address Heard by Many.”

104. For more on “Lincoln’s prophecy,” see Peterson (1994, 158–60).

105. N. C. Westerfield, “Lincoln’s Warning Cited as Realized,” *Townsend National Weekly*, April 29, 1935, 15.

106. “Everything that Lincoln foresaw has come true, with the exception that the Republic has been destroyed”; James T. Walter, “Walters Weekly Wind-Up,” *Townsend National Weekly*, October 21, 1935, 14.

even surpassing—the president who ended slavery. It symbolized a return to the America of myth, one defined not by the Revolution but rather by the Civil War and Lincoln: “This is America,” one *Weekly* article asserted; “But it is not the America of Abraham Lincoln’s time. *It is our job to see this man-made curse of civilization called the ‘depression’ is obliterated and Lincoln’s America is restored.*”<sup>107</sup> Appeals to a spiritual Lincoln established Townsend within the American political lineage. It was a connection sometimes explicit, ever implicit, and absolutely crucial to understanding how appeals to Lincoln operated within Townsendism and why they represent a more-than-secular interpretation of American politics.

## 5. CONCLUSION: CIVIL RELIGION REVISITED

This article demonstrates that Townsendism deserves to be remembered for more than its role in the evolution of Social Security. The organization embraced moral themes in American political thought, such as the covenant tradition and use of jeremiads, and ultimately drew heavily on the ACR to lobby for its pension scheme. This study outlines the ways that Townsendism borrowed religious and nationalistic imagery, bridging the divide between sacred and secular symbols. Townsendites’ moral righteousness came from a mystical view of politics: their cause was not a battle over personal souls, but rather a crusade for national salvation.

Townsendism represents a genuine attempt at creating a civil religion, but could it have been a full one in its own right? The short answer is probably not. Even if the Townsend Plan had passed instead of the SSA, it is unlikely that it could have withstood political reality.<sup>108</sup> This is the problem with a civil religion focused so narrowly on one piece of legislation: save an actual religious Second Coming after passing the plan, Townsendites would have been forced to confront both political compromise and the fact that the plan did not deliver its promised economic and spiritual renewal. It would not have been a problem so much with Townsend as a political symbol, whose birthday Townsendites eventually marked with a “Founder’s Day” celebration, as well as “pilgrimages” to visit his home in Long Beach.<sup>109</sup> Rather, the problem

107. “Townsend Plan Is an Absolute Necessity,” *Townsend National Weekly*, August 12, 1935, 2; emphasis added.

108. In fact, the Townsend Plan persisted as a lobbying organization until the 1980s, in part because the plan was not passed. It eventually disbanded in 1980, 20 years after Townsend’s death. See Amenta (2006, 217).

109. For more details on the Townsendites’ celebration of Francis E. Townsend himself, such as their Founder’s Day, see “Souvenir Program; Third Townsend National Convention; LA, CA, June 19–23, 1938,” Charles E. Young Research Library, Special Collections at UCLA, Collection 219, Box 145.

would have been with the plan itself. Reverence for it may have drawn on the same energies that make the Constitution a sacred symbol, but it was particularistic where the Constitution is general. When faced with a crisis, Americans would not have been able to engage exegetically with the plan in quite the same way that they read the founding document like the Bible. Ultimately Townsendism is more aptly described as a sect of America's civil religion, containing its own myth and sacred symbols—but not a sustainable belief system.

This article further integrates Townsendism into our understanding of other twentieth-century American phenomena. While the plan is here treated as a phenomenon distinct from Progressivism because of the symbols it created, it may still inform our understanding of that movement. Indeed, Bellah and others note that Progressives like Dewey continually appealed to common religious backgrounds in ways that sound eerily similar to a civil religion (Bellah 1986; see also Eisenach 1994). This article offers further evidence that American political thought supports something like the “religious interpretation of economics” that Robert Nelson (2014) describes. Similarly, Townsendism adds another dimension to our understanding of the Social Gospel tradition. In particular, it parallels John W. Compton's work on how evangelicals provided the narrative force behind the notion of a “living” Constitution. Townsendism shows that the effects Compton identifies may have repercussions beyond interpreting just the national charter. Appeals to the Townsend Plan seem to have resonated for the same reasons as the living Constitution: it was no “top-down” decision by elites, but rather “reflected the considered judgment of the American people” (Compton 2014, 181).

Additionally, this article shows that we must reexamine our approach to morality in American politics, as well as the ACR's role in American political thought more generally. The Townsend Plan demonstrates how the processes that created sacred symbols such as the flag (Marvin and Ingle 1999), the Constitution (Kammen 1986), and the founders (Albanese 1976) were alive and well, well into the twentieth century. Boosters channeled these same energies, sacralizing a new text and new statesman. It represents a significant departure from many studies on the ACR, which explore how existing symbols are used: how presidents address the nation (Novak 1974; Toolin 1983; Linder 1996; Gorski 2011), how the nation understands itself (Bellah 1967/2005; Stauffer 1973), and how appeals to these beliefs, symbols, and rituals affect our electoral politics (Wimberley 1980; Wimberley and Christenson 1982; Chapp 2012). Ultimately, this article suggests that Americans' civil religious lives are not limited to engaging prefabricated and static symbols, but are rather in constant flux.

The conclusions here should inform research into other social movements. For instance, is it possible that other movements could be described as “sects”

of the ACR, marshaling old and new symbols in pursuit of divisive policy goals? As with Townsendism, past scholarship on the American Liberty League ignores potential civil religious dimensions: scholars dismiss the organization's "Constitution worship" as pure pragmatism (Rudolph 1950; Wolfskill 1974; Sehat 2015). No attention has been given to the possibility that the American Liberty League genuinely engaged with, and possibly changed, symbols in the ACR during the run-up to the 1936 election. Similarly, today's Tea Party cites the Constitution as a sacred text (Goldstein 2011; Skocpol and Williamson 2012) and has attempted to adopt and adapt elements of the ACR solidified during the Civil Rights movement (Lowndes 2012).<sup>110</sup> Further research into these and other movements could indicate whether the ACR is indeed less monolithic than generally understood. Ultimately, such studies may help show how the "transitive property of mysticism" can inform studies of American politics more broadly.

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110. For more on African American civil religion, see Long (1974), Burkett (1978), and Woodrum and Bell (1989).

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