

Understanding the fake historian behind America's religious right



Photo above: David Barton is a controversial evangelical “historian” and activist.

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Jan 25, 2018

With a tie-breaking vote cast by Vice President Mike Pence, the Senate confirmed longtime religious-right figurehead and outgoing (and unpopular) Kansas Gov. Sam Brownback to be the US’s ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom on Wednesday.

Christian figures like Rev. Johnnie Moore, who served on the president’s evangelical outreach board during Trump’s campaign, praised Brownback as a “consistent, vocal, competent and impassioned advocate for these issues.” Groups like the Human Rights Campaign and Lambda Legal, on the other hand, castigated the vote, citing Brownback’s anti-LGBTQ record as both a governor and a former member of Congress.

But, less obviously (and no less importantly), he’s a major supporter of David Barton, the much-criticized Christian nationalist historian whose deeply skewed perspective on American history has been used by a number of Republican politicians to bolster a false narrative of America as a historically Christian nation.

The outgoing governor’s association with Barton is longstanding. Brownback has frequently referred to Barton as “one of my big heroes” for his preservation of America’s “beautiful heritage” and has appeared on Barton’s WallBuilders radio show. Barton has also headlined

the 2013 Kansas Prayer Breakfast during Brownback's time as governor.

Meanwhile, Barton is best-known for a series of books, including *Original Intent: The Courts, The Constitution, and Religion* and *The Jefferson Lies*, that argue America was founded by evangelical Christians as a Christian nation, and that the Founding Fathers intended for America to be run on Christian principles. He's also known for his lobbying group, WallBuilders, which attempts to bring Christianity into American public life by highlighting what he says is "forgotten history."

Barton and his ideas have made inroads into the political sphere: Barton was the vice chair of the Texas Republican Party from 1997 to 2006, and served as a Republican National Committee counselor in the 2004 presidential election, helping to court evangelicals. He's been cited and praised by conservative lawmakers and politicians from Michele Bachmann to Ted Cruz.

More generally, the Bartonian narrative of American history has been adopted by some within the Republican Party more widely. Brownback referred to Barton as providing "the philosophical underpinning for a lot of the Republican effort in the country today."

Many political figures, including Ted Cruz and Roy Moore, have embraced a form of Christian nationalism or Dominionism, based on the idea that the American government should run on Christian principles. Barton's focus is giving this idea legitimacy.

He perpetuates a cycle: By creating a deeply unbalanced history of America's foundations, he is able to legitimize the Christianized state he

would like to promote. And as an (at least ostensible) historian, he's able to partner with Republican lawmakers to cast a veneer of academic respectability over a thoroughly anti-academic message.

Barton has been promoting his particular narrative of American history for decades

Barton is a self-taught historian and activist. He's received little formal historical training and his sole credentialed degree is a bachelor's in religious education from evangelical Oral Roberts University, although he later claimed to have earned a doctorate from officially unaccredited Life Christian University on the basis of his published works.

He's also the founder of WallBuilders, a think tank devoted to promulgating the narrative that America was founded as a *specifically* Christian nation, and that the Founding Fathers were "orthodox, evangelical" Christians. (In fact, the majority of the Founding Fathers had more complicated religious views, often blending aspects of Christianity with deism, the Enlightenment-era belief in an unknowable creator-deity who did not operate in human affairs).

He's argued that the founders never intended for a separation of church and state, deriding the concept as a "liberal myth." In his 2000 book *Original Intent: The Courts, The Constitution, and Religion*, Barton argued that secular, liberal historians were involved in a conspiracy to cover up the "truth" about America's Christian origins for their own nefarious goals.

Instead, as a dominionist, Barton is among those who believe the ultimate goal for American government should be a Christian theocratic

state, which is necessary to properly usher in the apocalyptic End Times. Dominionism takes many forms, from the “hard dominionism” of R.J. Rushdoony, which advocated for a pure theocracy, to the “softer” Seven Mountains movement associated with Ted Cruz, among others, in which Christians are encouraged to take over the “seven mountains” of culture as a whole, from arts to education to government.

Nevertheless, its fundamental principle is the same: Christians must work toward a theocratic state in which Christians are in control. Or, as current congressional candidate (and fellow Barton enthusiast) Rick Saccone said in an interview last year with Pastors Network of America, God wants Christians “who will rule with the fear of God in them, to rule over us.”

Brownback’s connection with dominionism is no less longstanding, if slightly unorthodox. He has long been associated with evangelical Protestant dominionist preachers and ideas. While dominionism is usually associated with evangelical Protestants, Brownback is a Catholic convert. He also has close ties to the New Apostolic Reformation, a loose network of controversial evangelical preachers who believe themselves to be modern-day prophets heralding the end times.

As Brownback’s political prominence has expanded over the past several years, Barton’s work has been regularly championed by the Christian and broader political right. In 2010, Glenn Beck then called him “the most important man in America” for his work as a historian. In 2011, TV news pundit and former politician Mike Huckabee told attendees at a Rediscovering God in America conference that “all Americans [should] be forced ... at gunpoint” to listen to Barton talk.

Barton's star temporarily fell in 2011, when major Christian publishing house Thomas Nelson recalled Barton's book, *The Jefferson Lies*, after the book was revealed to contain major factual inaccuracies, including the claim that Jefferson had started church services in the Capitol building. By that time, *The Jefferson Lies*, a hagiographic work which argued that Jefferson was not a deist but an evangelical Christian who vigorously opposed slavery and racism, had reached the New York Times bestseller list.

Despite this, Barton is still cited as an expert by a number of GOP lawmakers. Another is Rick Saccone, the Pennsylvania Republican congressional candidate running in a special election to replace Tim Murphy, who resigned following allegations of an extramarital affair and asking a woman he was involved with to have an abortion.

Saccone's tacit endorsement of Barton — he chose Barton to introduce him at a rally in early 2017, signaling Saccone's wider political and religious views — should come as no surprise to those who have been following his career in politics. Saccone's rhetoric as both a state lawmaker and on the campaign trail centers around Bartonian ideas of America as a foundationally Christian nation.

His own book, *God in Our Government*, seems straight out of the Barton playbook, arguing, as Barton does, that secularists have conspired to obfuscate the Christian history of the United States. Historian John Fea, a longtime critic of Christian nationalism, refers to Saccone on his blog as "one of Pennsylvania's biggest David Barton supporters."

That Barton has continued to nurture a reputation as a credible historian and activist (he founded a super PAC devoted to Christian Reconstructionist Ted Cruz's 2016 presidential campaign) says a lot about the ways in which some politicians on the religious right feel the need to construct a facade of legitimacy to support their political ends. To create a mythical and simplistic version of the past — in which America was founded not just as a nation of Christians, deists, and other post-Enlightenment thinkers working out a complicated project of nationhood, but as a clear-cut theocratic state — is to provide an easy, useful narrative.

In the Barton narrative, which has come to permeate the narrative of the religious right more generally, America is supposed to be a Christian nation, and therefore any means taken to make America *more* theocratic (say, by posting “In God We Trust” on the walls of public schools, as Saccone wished to do) is automatically rendered legitimate.

Barton remains a prominent figure in evangelical and dominionist circles and a regular on conservative conference circuits. He continues to speak on his nationally syndicated WallBuilders radio show, on which he describes himself as “America’s premier historian.” That said, since his fall from grace, Barton has publicly been cited by fewer and fewer prominent politicians, which makes Saccone’s choice to feature him at an early rally striking. But despite this, his influence is such that his particular narrative of American history is still taken by some on the right as, well, gospel.

It’s also telling that so much of this revisionist American history is about blending Christianity with a very specific form of American (usually

white) nationalism. Figures like Barton blend the idea that America is a “Christian country” with the idea that the only critiques of the Founding Fathers — that, say, they owned slaves or contributed to racial inequality — come from “politically correct” historians seeking to discredit America’s great history for political ends.

The founders double as hero-saints to Barton. Central to the idea that America was founded as a Christian nation is the idea that America was founded *unproblematically*; that only a return to this mythologized past will somehow solve perceived problems of structural inequality. “Real” America, in other words, is above criticism.

Of course, it’s worth saying that *all* accounts of history — left-wing or right-wing, secular or Christian — can also be, in a sense, a form of propaganda. Any narrative of America’s foundation will, of course, be mediated by the specific biases and concerns of the teller. (Historian Fea does a great job pointing out that the secular counterpart to the Barton narrative, that all founding fathers were non-Christian, deist secularists, is also wrong).

National myths have always been as much about who we want to be as who we really were. That’s all the more reason to promote a wide variety of voices, from all sides of the political aisle, within the world of academic history.

But what Barton is doing — and what his political allies are doing by embracing him — is worse than that. Like Washington, DC’s new Museum of the Bible, Barton uses the *appearance* of academic inquiry without any of its rigor — to shill for a Christian dominionist approach to government that ideologues from Newt Gingrich to Michele

Bachmann to Brownback to Trump's latest favorite candidate, Saccone, are all too happy to accept without question.

Of course, the concerns of most Christian dominionists isn't *historical* at all, but rather eschatological. The Ted Cruzes and Rick Saccones of the world are ultimately focused not on America's history as a Christian nation, but are instead more concerned with the apocalyptic End Times a Christian nation is supposed to usher in, according to certain strains of evangelical belief.

In other words, Barton's history is focused more on his vision for the apocalypse than on the actual past. And America is becoming more ill-informed for it.

<https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/1/25/16919362/understanding-the-fake-historian-behind-americas-religious-right>