



Spencer Gore, *Cave of the Golden Calf, (study) (1912)*



ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

OCTOBER 2024 | 28.5

The Imperative to “Make America Great Again”: A Brief History

J. DAVID STARK

In recent years, the United States has been awash with the imperative to “make America great again” (MAGA). Whether advanced as an agenda to be promoted, contested as a danger to the republic, or anything in between, the MAGA imperative has frequently figured in the media, various public discussions, and innumerable private conversations. This imperative has also shown itself capable of transforming both religious convictions and its own history into further support for its agenda.

According to Google Ngram data, however, the MAGA imperative is attested at least since the late 19th century.¹ Through 2012, the slogan’s frequency in the Google Ngram data set particularly peaked in the early 1980s and the late 2000s, accounting for respectively about 0.000000575%

¹ [“Make America Great Again: 1700–2012.”](#) Google Books Ngram Viewer, accessed September 17, 2024.

or 0.000000300% – that is, 575 or 300 billionths of a percent.² In each case, the slogan rose in prominence in a period following an economic downturn – the multiple recessions during and around the 1970s on the one hand and the so-called “Great Recession” (2007–2009) on the other.³ The MAGA slogan’s representation then declines in 1983–2000, with a brief and modest resurgence that coincides with the

² [“Make America Great Again: 1800–2012.”](#) Google Books Ngram Viewer, accessed September 4, 2024.

³ Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, [“Dates of U.S. Recessions as Inferred by GDP-Based Recession Indicator.”](#) Federal Reserve Economic Data, accessed September 5, 2024. More precisely, the United States economy was in recession during four different periods and 43.40% of the total time from the second quarter of 1969 through the second quarter of 1982. The Great Recession stretched from the fourth quarter of 2007 to the second quarter of 2009. This Federal Reserve resource includes data only back to 1 October 1967. So, it cannot be used to correlate economic trends with the earliest attestations to the MAGA slogan.





Marta Shmatava, *PR2* (2012)

recession that stretched from the fourth quarter of 1989 to the first quarter of 1991.⁴ With the brief recession from the first to third quarters of 2001, the slogan likewise begins to make another modest rise.⁵

From 2002–2006, the MAGA slogan slightly more than doubles its representation (from 0.0000001049% to 0.0000002423%).⁶ In this period, there is no economic recession to prompt the further increase in the slogan.⁷ A likely alternative prompt for this continued rise is the terror attacks the United States sustained on 11 September 2001. But for context, even in 2006, the slogan is still less than half as prominent as it had been at its height in the early 1980s (i.e., 0.0000005777% in 1983 versus 0.0000002423% in 2006) (“Make America Great Again: 1800–2012”). And after the Great Recession, the slogan again sees decline from 2009 to 2012.⁸ This decline again correlates with modest but definitely improved economic conditions after this point.

From 2012 to 2022 (the most recent year for which Ngram data is available), however, the MAGA slogan’s representation saw as much as a 70-fold increase (from 0.0000002660% to 0.0000187757%).⁹ Beginning in 2015–2016, Donald Trump’s adoption of MAGA as a campaign slogan contributes to

this upturn,¹⁰ but it does not explain why the upturn began as early as 2012. Instead, the impetus for the slogan’s rising wave that Trump began to ride a few years later seems to have been the 2012 re-election of Barack Obama as President of the United States (“Make America Great Again: 1800–2012”).

Under the previous Democratic administration of Bill Clinton (1993–2001), however, the MAGA slogan found its lowest ebb since 1977 (“Make America Great Again: 1800–2012”). So, the slogan’s renewed rise from 2012 forward seems to have had no direct connection to Obama’s party affiliation, a hypothesis that the slogan’s decline during his first term (2008–2012) supports (“Make America Great Again: 1800–2012”). In addition, by 2012, no initiative of the Obama administration had fostered an economic downturn comparable to those that preceded earlier MAGA waves, and there would be no such downturn until the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic began to be felt in 2020 (according to the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, “Dates of U.S. Recessions”).

Between 2008 and 2012, however, what had happened was the passage of the “Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act,” which Obama signed into law on 23 March 2010.¹¹ The act provided for its requirements to be put into force in various stages through the end of 2014 (United States Congress). On 28 June 2012, the United States Supreme Court cleared the act from legal challenges to its constitutionality.¹² On 6 November 2012, Obama’s re-election put an end to thoughts that a 2012 election of a Republican president might still facilitate the act’s reversal before it was fully implemented.¹³ And just 14 days later, on 19 November 2012, Trump filed an application to legally trademark the MAGA slogan for “political action committee services, namely, promoting public awareness of political issues and fundraising in the field of politics.”¹⁴

For the first time in the slogan’s history, it became legal property and, as such, became subject to the political affiliations of its holder. From this point, the slogan could have been deployed much as Ronald Reagan had done with his 1980 presidential campaign slogan, “Let’s Make

4 Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; “Make America Great Again: 1800–2012.”

5 Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, “Dates of U.S. Recessions”; “Make America Great Again: 1800–2012.”

6 “Make America Great Again! Christian: 1800–2012,” Google, accessed September 5, 2024.

7 Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, “Dates of U.S. Recessions.”

8 “Make America Great Again: 2000–2016,” Google Books Ngram Viewer, accessed September 5, 2024.

9 “Make America Great Again: 2012–2022,” Google Books Ngram Viewer, accessed September 4, 2024.

10 Enrico Bonadio, “How Donald Trump Trademarked the Slogan ‘Make America Great Again,’” *The Conversation*, October 15, 2015.

11 United States Congress, “The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act,” Pub. L. No. 124-119, 111-148 Public Law (2010).

12 Nancy-Ann DeParle, “Supreme Court Upholds President Obama’s Health Care Reform,” The White House, June 28, 2012.

13 Dirk Johnson, “Symbol of Pride, Inverted, Is Now Symbol of Political Dismay,” *The New York Times*, December 17, 2012; Tracy Weber and Charles Ornstein, “The Outlook for ‘Obamacare’ in Two Maps,” ProPublica, November 8, 2012.

14 Donald J. Trump, “Trademark/Service Mark Application, Principal Register: Make America Great Again,” United States Patent and Trademark Office, November 19, 2012.

America Great Again.”¹⁵ With this slogan, Reagan expressed his criticism of the Democratic incumbent Jimmy Carter’s administration. Yet he did so in a way that was cooperative and invitational – “Let’s Make America Great Again.” And Reagan clearly articulated how the “us” with whom he identified and wanted to cooperate in making America “great again” was the American people, regardless of ethnic, political, or religious affiliations.¹⁶ Reagan’s critique was of the Carter administration in particular, not of all – or even many – other Americans whose affiliations differed from his own.¹⁷ Nor was his critique of the Carter administration, while severe, anything like total opposition (Reagan, “Inaugural address”).

Such has, however, not been the history of the MAGA slogan since 2012. From this point, the slogan stopped being a collective response against an identifiable, external economic or other national crisis. Instead, it began its transition into a slogan that some Americans would deploy in response against *other Americans*. As it does so, the MAGA slogan also becomes imbued much more with religious connotations:

1. From 2012–2022, the MAGA slogan collates with discussion of Christianity at roughly 3 times the rate it did before that time.¹⁸
2. While the imperative to “make America pray again” (MAPA) is attested before 2012, its prominence vastly increases in the period of 2012–2022.¹⁹
3. Similarly, the imperative to “make America Christian again” (MACA) is modestly attested before this period.²⁰ But only in 2014 and later – after the full implementation of the Affordable Care Act – does this parodied imperative rise to any meaningful prominence.²¹

So, beginning around 2012, the MAGA slogan began to be deployed *between* Americans (not just *by* them collectively against an external challenge or, perhaps, the

narrow target of a previous administration), rose to much greater prominence than it previously had and developed much stronger religious ties (e.g., in its MACA and MAPA parodies). Societies and social actions are far from simple, and other factors may also be in play. But the MAGA imperative is deeply political, directly assertive of its own agenda for the public square, and often closely intertwined with religious convictions, political affiliations, or both. And the more this intertwining occurs, the more it authorises, underwrites, and strengthens the MAGA imperative. Combined with the MAGA imperative itself, these political affiliations and religious convictions come to form “a threefold cord” that, as the preacher says, “is not quickly broken” (Eccl 4:12 ESV). Instead, each strand reinforces the others and, thereby, the rightness of the MAGA cause.

Yet as H.-G. Gadamer reflects,

The notorious statement, “The party (or the Leader) is always right” is not wrong because it claims that a certain leadership is superior, but because it serves to shield the leadership, by a dictatorial decree, from any criticism that might be true.²²

To exercise its role properly, whether within the American political system or elsewhere, any given party *cannot be* “always right” or, similarly, always the “winner” in a contest with another.²³ Instead, it must always lay itself open to

22 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ed. and trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed., Bloomsbury Revelations (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 389n22.

23 Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Führer and the Individual in the Younger Generation,” in *Berlin: 1932–1933*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best, David Higgins, and Douglas W. Stott, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 12 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 280. As an aside, this phenomenon is one way of explaining how the difference between the “visible” and “invisible” church arises. The “invisible” church is the church in its ideal that is “always right.” But the “visible” church

15 Ronald Reagan, “[Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech](#),” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, July 17, 1980; Volle, “MAGA Movement.”

16 Reagan, “[Acceptance Speech](#)”; Ronald Reagan, “[Inaugural Address](#),” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, January 20, 1981, ; Ronald Reagan, “[Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress Reporting on the State of the Union](#),” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, January 26, 1982.

17 Reagan, “Acceptance Speech”; Reagan, “Inaugural Address”; Reagan, “State of the Union.”

18 “‘Make America Great Again’ Christian: 1800–2012”; “[Make America Great Again’ Christian: 2012–2022](#),” Google, accessed September 5, 2024.

19 “[Make America Pray Again’: 1800–2012](#),” Google, accessed September 10, 2024.

20 “[Make America Christian Again](#),” Google, accessed September 5, 2024.

21 “[Make America Christian Again](#),” Google Books Ngram Viewer, accessed September 5, 2024.



Marta Shmatava, *Landscape* (2009)

being shown to be in the wrong or losing. To the extent that it is not, it ignores the ways it might improve if it heeded critiques. And losing the ability to lose does not mean gaining assurance of winning. It means, rather, the loss of any possibility of free and fair play to begin with. More seriously still, an inability to stand in the wrong usurps a claim of rightness that itself can alone be made rightly by the one Lord who ultimately will judge right and wrong for all.²⁴

By contrast, since 2012, the MAGA programme has characteristically not laid itself open to being in the wrong. Instead, this new phase of MAGA's history that began in a policy dispute over healthcare legislation now regularly fuses religious appeals with its own agenda. Many of these appeals have been discussed and illustrate various strategies for portraying the religiously correct viewpoint as wholly on the MAGA movement's side, thereby insulating it from critique.²⁵ But there is another appeal that – to this point – has escaped close scrutiny.

Project 2025's much-discussed *Mandate for Leadership* nowhere expressly uses the MAGA slogan.²⁶ Yet it clearly appeals to this ideal by describing how

The last time our nation and movement were so near defeat, we rallied together behind a great leader and great ideas, transcended our differences, rescued our nation, and changed the world. *It's time to do it again.*

Now, as then, we know who we are fighting and what we are fighting for: for our Republic, our freedom, and for each other. The next conservative President will enter office on January 20, 2025, with a simple choice: *greatness or failure*. It will be a daunting test, but no more so than every generation of Americans has faced and passed.²⁷

is the church in its concrete manifestations as it must always, beset with many stumbles, seek to follow its Lord more perfectly. Cf. Martin Luther, *A Short Exposition of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism*, trans. Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America (St. Louis: Concordia, 1912), 100–101.

24 Bonhoeffer, "The Führer and the Individual"; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 4* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 57.

25 For example, McKay Coppins, "The Most Revealing Moment of a Trump Rally," *The Atlantic*, July 29, 2024; Russell Moore, *Losing Our Religion: An Altar Call for Evangelical America* (New York: Sentinel, 2023); see also Bonhoeffer, "The Führer and the Individual," 270–71, 277–78. The MAGA slogan's prior rise in response to the 11 September terror attacks may also form an important role in the slogan's subsequent development. Seen as presenting an acute threat from a religiously differentiated adversary, opposition to them could, then, have laid further groundwork for the transformation that the MAGA slogan has undergone since 2012.

26 See Paul Dans and Steven Groves, eds., *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2023).

27 Dans and Groves, *Mandate*, 16–17; italics added.



Georgia O'Keeffe, *The Flag* (1918)

And in several places, the *Mandate* explicitly connects itself to Trump, who has made MAGA his defining slogan (for example, xv–xxiii.). Trump has repeatedly disclaimed any knowledge of Project 2025.²⁸ Yet the Project's *Mandate* clearly intends to support the MAGA agenda. So even granting Trump's assertions of ignorance about the Project, the widest possible distance between him and the *Mandate* is that both are independent advocates toward the same MAGA goal.

As the *Mandate* articulates this goal, there is only one theologian whom the document expressly cites as such – namely, the 20th-century Lutheran, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The *Mandate's* appeal to Bonhoeffer runs as follows:

Today's progressive Left so cavalierly supports open borders despite the lawless humanitarian crisis their policy created along America's southern border.... Open-borders activism is a classic example of what the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace" – publicly promoting one's own virtue without risking any personal inconvenience. Indeed, the only direct impact of open borders on pro-open borders elites is that the constant flow of illegal immigration suppresses the wages of their housekeepers, landscapers, and busboys.

28 Simon J. Levien, "What Is Project 2025, and Why Did Trump Disavow It at the Debate?" *The New York Times*, September 12, 2024.

“Cheap grace” aptly describes the Left’s love affair with environmental extremism. Those who suffer most from the policies environmentalism would have us enact are the aged, poor, and vulnerable. It is not a political cause, but a pseudo-religion meant to baptize liberals’ ruthless pursuit of absolute power in the holy water of environmental virtue.²⁹

Thus, the *Mandate* deploys Bonhoeffer’s concept of “cheap grace” to describe what the *Mandate* refers to as leftist border and environmental policy. For Bonhoeffer, however, “cheap” and “costly” are diametrically opposed ways of describing the orientation toward grace provided through Jesus’ sacrificial death.³⁰ Each kind of grace might give rise to its own pattern of political behaviour, but neither addresses or defines these patterns as such. Instead, as Bonhoeffer describes these two orientations toward grace,

Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord’s Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.

Costly grace is the hidden treasure in the field, for the sake of which people go and sell with joy everything they have. It is the costly pearl, for whose price the merchant sells all that he has; it is Christ’s sovereignty, for the sake of which you tear out an eye if it causes you to stumble. It is the call of Jesus Christ which causes a disciple to leave his nets and follow him.³¹

These facts mean that the *Mandate*’s attempt to partially underwrite itself with Bonhoeffer’s concept of “cheap grace” proves diametrically opposed to how Bonhoeffer describes this concept in at least one of four ways.

1. Despite the *Mandate*’s mention of “cheap grace,” the document nowhere appeals to the concept of “costly grace.” Perhaps the *Mandate*, contrary to Bonhoeffer, conceives of a scenario in which only “cheap grace” exists. Its opposite would then be something besides “costly grace.” If the *Mandate* does have a place for “costly grace,” perhaps,
2. the place of “costly grace” lies wholly in the political sphere without any religious

implications. If so, the *Mandate* and its proposals regarding immigration and environmental issues run contrary to how tightly Bonhoeffer sees costly grace as both emerging from the sacrifice of Jesus and issuing a summons to follow him.³² Or perhaps,

3. the place of “costly grace” lies wholly in the religious sphere without any political implications. If so, the *Mandate* excludes the sphere of legitimate – and sometimes required – political action that Bonhoeffer describes for the church.³³ Or perhaps,
4. the place of “costly grace” lies in some fusion of religious and political agendas, one kind of which is already implicit in the possibility of “costly grace” lying wholly in the political sphere. If so, it is to the negative effects of such fusion that Bonhoeffer bears clear witness both in his surviving writings and in his death.³⁴

³² Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 44–45.

³³ For example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Church and the Jewish Question,” in *Berlin: 1932–1933*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. Carsten Nicolaisen et al., *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 12* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 361–70.

³⁴ For example, Bonhoeffer, “The Führer and the Individual”; Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, updated (Nashville: Nelson, 2020).



Georgia O’Keeffe, *Red and Orange Streak* (1987)

²⁹ Dans and Groves, *Mandate*, 11.

³⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 43–56.

³¹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 44–45.

Thus, the *Mandate's* appeal to Bonhoeffer fails to appeal to his thought so much as to its own refraction of it. This appeal is, then, yet another example of the MAGA movement's attempted fusion with religious convictions and how that fusion proves compelling to many. But it does so at the cost of transforming those convictions into something other than they have previously been.

Nevertheless, attempts at this kind of transformation have become enmeshed into the movement's efforts to bring greatness to America "again." In such efforts, the movement seeks to return the United States to a prior, idealised period of greatness from which the country has since seemed to have declined, whether that be in the 1950s, the 1980s, before the Affordable Care Act, or before Obama's first or second terms.³⁵ And perhaps here, the post-2012 MAGA movement's propensity for transforming its surroundings into its own image encounters its greatest irony.

That is, the contemporary MAGA movement has reinvented its own history in various ways. It has aimed at *restoration* or, more properly, *reversion* – at drawing the country back to some period of greatness that has passed (For example, see Dans and Groves, *Mandate*, xiii–17). But

35 Cf. Leonard Steinhorn, "The Fundamental Flaw in 'Make America Great Again'," *Washington Post*, July 26, 2022.

precisely in so doing, the post-2012 MAGA movement has left aside more than Reagan's cooperative and inviting "Let's." It has also reversed Reagan's vision for what it might mean for America to be "great again." For Reagan, the country's being "great again" explicitly did *not* mean reversion to a previous, idealised state. It meant a realisation of the country's ability to *surpass itself* and its own prior levels of what might have been considered greatness (Reagan, "Acceptance Speech"). It did not mean a return to a previous period of supposed greatness that, in reality, had severe difficulties of its own.³⁶ It meant a continuation of progress and improvement.

So, having left aside Reagan's "Let's" and transformed what it might mean for America to be "great again," the post-2012 MAGA movement also finds itself in quite a distinct phase. And only time will tell how and how far the imperative to "make America great again" will itself continue to "make America."

J. David Stark is Professor of Biblical Studies and the Winnie and Cecil May Jr. Biblical Research Fellow at Faulkner University and Senior Research Fellow at the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology in Cambridge. For more from David, see j davidstark.com.

36 Cf. Kim Soffen and Denise Lu, "When Was America Great? It Depends on Who You Are," *Washington Post*, October 7, 2016.



Frederic Edwin Church, *Our Banner in the Sky* (1861)