

Senators probe politics and piety in new books

by [Jack Jenkins](#)

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Truth be told, when asked to name a spiritual role model, few people would likely pick a sitting U.S. senator.

In fact, with congressional approval ratings at record lows, few lawmakers -- Democrats or Republicans -- would seem to qualify as a profile in righteousness.

But two new books this summer, Sen. Jim DeMint's "The Great American Awakening" and Sen. Joe Lieberman's "The Gift of Rest," are trying to push back against the image of a godless Senate.

To be sure, DeMint and Lieberman have differences both political and religious: DeMint is a Tea Party Republican from South Carolina and a self-described "follower of Christ," while Lieberman, an observant Jew from Connecticut, is a sometimes unpredictable Independent.

But their books offer equally intimate glimpses into the spiritual lives of America's elected officials.

On the surface, DeMint's "The Great American Awakening" is primarily focused on the insurgent conservative movement, particularly the Tea Party.

"The book is really about what Americans did between when Obama was elected and the 2010 elections," DeMint said in an interview. "The power has shifted out of the hands of Washington and back into the hands of the people where it belongs."

While the topic is technically more about politics than religion, DeMint said the title of the book is meant to echo the Second Great

Awakening, a period of religious revival in the early 19th century.

"(The Tea Party) is as much a spiritual awakening as a political awakening," said DeMint, a Presbyterian. "The concern about our country ... has awakened the faith of many people."

DeMint frequently cites Christian theology and biblical passages to help make his points. "The spiritual assessment is just the lens I look through," he said.

Such strong connections between faith and politics seem second nature to DeMint in his book. Arguing that the separation of church and state "is contrary to what our founders envisioned," he attacks the idea of big government on spiritual grounds.

"Big government is a religious issue," DeMint writes. "History shows in nations where there is a big government, there is a little God. When people are dependent on government, they are less dependent on God, and their spiritual fervor fades. Socialism and secularism go hand in hand, as do faith and freedom."

DeMint admitted that he hasn't always been so passionate about his faith. His political education started later in life, around the same time he started his faith journey.

"I had never spoken in public until I was 25," he said. "My first public talk was giving my testimony. ... I had some time wasted up until that point."

In addition to attending a weekly Senate prayer breakfast, DeMint meets once a week with a bipartisan group of Senators to pray and "keep each other accountable" despite the often tense political environment of Washington.

"(These meetings) help me recognize the bond we have in Christ and the love we have for each other even when we disagree, sometimes strongly," DeMint said. "I think it helps keep the flame (of faith) alive."

While DeMint speaks to a larger group of the faithful in his book, Lieberman's "The Gift of Rest" centers around his personal understanding of the Jewish Sabbath, the 24-hour period of rest and worship that starts each Friday at sundown and lasts until Saturday evening.

Lieberman, who in 2000 became the first Jew to receive a major party's nomination for vice president, often prays in Orthodox synagogues and takes the ritual seriously.

"Observing the Sabbath is a commandment I have embraced, the fourth commandment to be exact, which Moses received from God on Mt. Sinai," Lieberman writes. "For me, Sabbath observance is a gift because it is one of the deepest, purest pleasures in my life."

Lieberman's Sabbath-keeping, which usually means refraining from work and shunning electronics or cars, has sometimes complicated his political life. Lieberman almost never holds campaign or political events on Saturdays, and once had to scramble to find a non-Jewish staffer to drive him to a last-minute budget meeting at the Capitol.

Lieberman will still go to vote in occasional late-night Friday or Saturday sessions, but only after walking the hour-and-a-half trek to the Capitol from his home in Georgetown, even in the rain.

"I think that there has actually been a balance between honoring the Sabbath and honoring your responsibilities to others," he said. The retiring senator said his faith supports his role as a lawmaker.

"Judaism is a religion that is focused on the law and the distinctions between right and wrong," Lieberman said. "I don't call my rabbi to ask how I should vote on the budget, but there is no question that a series of values that come with my religion ... have had an effect on me."