Thank you, Pastor Dull, for your very kind introduction and thank you, Sharon Ray, for the honor of speaking here at the Blair County Courthouse on our national day of prayer.

Let me say a short prayer of my own at the outset of this talk. I am more than a little daunted to speak in the presence of such Godly and scholarly men and women in this audience. I am sure I won’t be able to impart the level of wisdom they might, but I do trust God to use me today for His purpose.

Last Friday evening I went to the Baker mansion for an event that paid tribute to veterans of World War II. One of the rooms of the mansion was adorned with WW II memorabilia including a vial of sand from Iwo Jima. Think of the battle at Iwo Jima for a moment—it defies description and understanding: How could a tiny island of volcanic ash in the vast Pacific Ocean serve as the decision point for the future of civilization? Yet nothing less was at stake there in 1945. In that carnage and horror and destruction, still God’s glory shown and an evil empire was sent to defeat.

But another artifact at the mansion caught my attention. It was a copy of the front page of the Altoona Mirror from May 8, 1945—V-E Day, whose 70th anniversary is tomorrow. The banner read, not surprisingly, **WAR ENDS IN EUROPE**. Fitting and succinct. Yet there were two headlines underneath the banner. The one on the left read “**Gratitude to God is V-E Theme**”; the headline on the right read, “**President sets day of prayer**.”

For that time and for most of American history up to that point, it was as natural as anything for the American people to publicly and collectively call on God in reverence and gratitude. Our own state Constitution begins with the words, “WE, the people of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, grateful to Almighty God for the blessings of civil and religious liberty, and humbly invoking His guidance, do ordain and establish this Constitution.”

Governor Wolf made the comment this week at the Commonwealth Prayer Breakfast that public prayer has always been central to the American nation. I want to believe that, but the only way prayer is central is if God is central and I am very sorry to say I don’t see much evidence for that in our public square anymore.

Sam Rohrer, president of the American and Pennsylvania Pastors Network warns, “We are running out of time in America … before God will remove his hand of blessing from our nation.” William Penn’s observation is becoming more prophetic with each passing day, “A people who will not be ruled by God, will be ruled by tyrants.”

But let us ponder the positive and what I think accounts for the phrase, “American Exceptionalism.”

There is a Biblical view of the world and I would insist that is the correct view of the world. There is a Creator, and the rules of human behavior are codified in the Judeo-Christian ethic. What makes America great begins, as our nation’s founding document states, with an appeal “to the Supreme Judge for the rectitude of our intentions,” and “a firm reliance on Divine Providence.”

I think this is captured nicely on the Great Seal of the United States. The Seal actually has two sides and on the reverse or back side is the American Eagle.

But I call your attention to the obverse or front side of the Great Seal with an unfinished pyramid in the center. Below that are the words, “Novus Ordo Seclorum,”; above is the eye of God and above that the words “Annuit Coeptus”.

Novus Ordo Seclorum—a new order of the ages; that is, a nation, not of kings, lords and serfs, but one where all men are created equal, where each human being is infinitely valuable in God’s eyes.

We are endowed with life and liberty for our Heavenly Father has given each of us a life and free will with it and when we exercise it without heed to His Word, we sin. Yet, He loves us so much he became man and died for our sins.

One personal story if I might digress. When I first ran for office, I needed a lot of pictures of me for the campaign. A consultant arranged for a photographer whom I had never met and knew nothing about.

For three and one half hours we went around to different venues, meeting up with friends and supporters and getting hundreds of pictures of me taken. It was awkward and uncomfortable. I know, you are wondering why would a tall, strong, handsome man like me be camera-shy? Well, it was a new experience and just not a very pleasant one.

As we were finishing up, I got overcome with inadequate feelings and the photographer asked about it. I explained that I really didn’t deserve the support of these people. One was the daughter of man slain by Nazis for trying to protect Jews during World War II. Another couple were Gold Star parents whose pilot son had died in Afganistan. Yet another was a silver star recipient who had served three tours in Vietnam. I said to the photographer, “I just don’t deserve support from folks like that.”

Her response was quick, “Do you believe you deserve eternal life?”

I got her point immediately. I don’t deserve what Christ did for me, but I accept his gift of salvation. I don’t deserve what my supporters did and do for me, but that’s also a gift from God. I don’t deserve the sacrifice of the men and women who have served in our U.S. military, many paying the ultimate price, but they manifest God’s love and I’m going to accept that too.

Back to the Great Seal of the United States: Above the unfinished pyramid is the eye of God, representative of where the people of this nation need always to focus. Annuit Coeptus—He has favored our undertaking. He has endowed us with rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but if our lives and liberty on not used to pursue happiness in concert with God, then those rights are in vain.

Finally, let’s look at the base of the pyramid, its foundation, and the year inscribed there, 1776.

What was the Spirit of 1776 in which the United States of America was conceived? What was Abraham Lincoln referring to when he said, “Four Score and Seven Years ago”? Doing the math, four score plus 7 is 87 and when subtracted from 1863, the year of the Gettysburg Address, gets us back to 1776.

I would argue that the Spirit of ’76 was and remains a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. The colonies were founded by people seeking religious freedom and the growing oppression from the king did not sit well with them. In churches throughout the colonies, the Word was preached (Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God) and it produced a mindset of independence and self-determination for the will of God.

Perhaps, this was most dramatically displayed on January 21st of 1776. A young minister named Peter Muhlenberg took to the pulpit in Virginia. His sermon that day was that the colonists have religious justification for fighting the British. He preached on Ecclesiastes: “There is a time for war and a time for peace, and now is the time for war”. As his fiery sermon ended, he threw off his clerical robe revealing a Continental Army uniform. He then marched out of his church with 300 men following him.

Fast forward now to 1954. President Eisenhower attends a worship service at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington D.C., the same church regularly attended by Abraham Lincoln nearly a century before. The sermon is given that day by George MacPherson Docherty, who commemorates Lincoln’s Gettysburg address and calls for the inclusion of the words, “under God” in our Pledge of Allegiance. Reverend Docherty argued that it is not economic prosperity, nor military might that accounts for America’s greatness, but rather its spiritual and moral foundation.

President Eisenhower echoed that thought in a letter later that year, “These words, ‘under God’ will remind Americans that despite our great physical strength we must remain humble. They will help us to keep constantly in our minds and hearts the spiritual and moral principles which alone give dignity to man, and upon which our way of life is founded."

So, on this national day of prayer in 2015, may we cherish our Biblical roots (and our Bibles too). We know that the restoration and preservation of American Exceptionalism can only come through prayer and devotion to God. Let us remember that the foundation of that Exceptionalism, symbolized as the base of an unfinished pyramid, the Spirit of ’76 remains with us as the Holy Spirit.

May we steadfastly turn to God for his love and guidance. And may we not spend time and effort trying to get God on our side, but pray always for His glorification, using prayer to follow Our Heavenly Father’s will.