

Franklin Graham on Trump Impeachment: 'Our Country Could Begin to Unravel'

Evangelist Franklin Graham issued a dire warning about the fate of the United States, should the presidential impeachment inquiry started by the U.S. House lead to President Donald Trump's ouster.

"Our country could begin to unravel if an elected president is thrown out of office because of lies and the media," said Graham, president and CEO of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, in an interview on Wednesday (Oct. 2) with Religion News Service. "It could be a devastating thing. We're in very dangerous territory. I would encourage all the politicians to look very carefully at where we are and first of all make sure that truth is told."

Graham, a staunch Trump supporter, said the impeachment inquiry about Trump's interactions with the leader of Ukraine was a political move by a party that refuses to accept Trump's election victory three years ago.

Graham spoke during a stop on his eight-city Decision America Tour through his home state of North Carolina, which he described as an effort to ask people to commit their lives to Jesus and to pray for the country. On Tuesday, he preached to an estimated 9,200 people in Fayetteville, N.C. On Sunday he will speak at an amphitheater in Raleigh, the state capital. He concludes the tour on Oct. 13 with a rally in Asheville.

The 67-year-old evangelist, son of the late Billy Graham, has been planning the tour since last year—a follow-up to the 50-state tour he took during the 2016 presidential election year.

But news of the Democratic House's impeachment inquiry has

given the tour a new urgency.

Graham's defense of the president echoed that of fellow evangelical Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Church Dallas, who has warned of a potential civil war if the House votes on impeachment and who has accused Democrats of worshipping the pagan god Moloch.

Sounding the alarm about a nation in peril is a tried-and-true evangelical strategy, said John Fea, professor of American history at Messiah College in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania.

"I've argued this has been a typical part of evangelical political engagement for centuries—fear mongering," Fea said. "You can't make an argument to support what the president did on his phone call with the Ukrainian president. So what do you do? You play the traditional game of instilling fear in the electorate so they will see us falling off the cliff as a nation and this apocalyptic language will convince them they have to vote for Trump again in 2020."

The House's inquiry will look at allegations that Trump abused his power by pressuring Ukraine to investigate one of his political rivals, Joe Biden, and Biden's son Hunter, who served on the board of a major Ukrainian natural gas producer.

Asked about the substance of the inquiry, Graham suggested it was political theater.

"This is nothing about nothing," Graham said. "It's just a huge distraction. The Democratic Party has refused to accept that (Trump) won the election. All the media and the polls showed he was going to lose and he won. He should be treated fairly and he hasn't been."

Asked again about the specifics of the case, he said, "I'm concerned about Joe Biden's son, who's known to be using cocaine."

Then Graham added: "For him to be using his father, while his father was vice president of the United States, to gain monetary value for himself, that should be looked into. That concerns me far more than having the president of the Ukraine look into the allegations into Joe Biden's son."

(In a *New Yorker* article in July, Hunter Biden, a lawyer and a lobbyist, said he had struggled with alcohol and drug addiction.)

Graham's outspoken support for Trump has been constant. Back in 2016, he said Trump's victory was providential. In his words, "God showed up."

Earlier this summer, prior to special counsel Robert Mueller's congressional testimony on his 22-month-long investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election, Graham posted to Facebook a call for a "special day of prayer for the president."

"I'm just burdened for him and his family that God would somehow protect him and get him through this," Graham told RNS on May 31.

Just this past week, Graham said he was invited to a state dinner at the White House in honor of Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison. Graham also accompanied Trump during his remarks at the United Nations National Assembly on Sept. 24.

In some ways, Graham's support for Trump harks back to his famous father, Billy, who counseled a dozen presidents during his long public ministry. Among them was Richard Nixon, who resigned from the presidency in 1974 in the face of almost certain impeachment after the Watergate scandal. Graham later said he regretted his political interference on Nixon's behalf.

"Looking back, I know I sometimes crossed the line, and I

wouldn't do that now," Billy Graham told *Christianity Today* in 2011.

Franklin Graham said he was not troubled by that precedent.

"We are disappointed in life by people," Franklin Graham said. "But that's part of life. [My father] continued to visit [Nixon] and try to encourage him and be a pastor to him."

Graham insisted his Decision America Tour was not a political rally.

"I'm not encouraging people to vote for Trump. It's not a Trump rally. I don't encourage them to vote for a Democrat either. But I do encourage them to pray for our country. That's extremely important. If we don't, we could lose our country. We need to pray."

Still, this week, the evangelical movement known as Red Letter Christians held a revival in response to Graham's Decision America Tour.

On Wednesday the Rev. William J. Barber II was one of the headliners of the two-day conference at his church in Goldsboro, which also featured Tony Campolo, Traci Blackmon and Shane Claiborne.

"We think it important to offer Christians a space to come together and focus on a message that connects Jesus to justice, good news for the poor, health care, immigrants," said Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, one of the organizers and speakers.

Wilson-Hartgrove said many evangelicals insist that only die-hard Republicans are Christians and that only they carry the torch for biblical values.

"There are lots of people who want something better for our faith and for our country," he said. "We want people to realize they are not alone." {eoa}