



OP-ED: Prayer in America

With the approach of the National Day of Prayer on Thursday, May 7, and the worldwide blossoming of prayer during the coronavirus pandemic, it seems a good time to take a look at the status of prayer in American society. The *National Day of Prayer* (NDP) was signed into law in 1952 by President Truman and amended and signed by President Reagan in 1988 to designate the first Thursday in May as the NDP (Public Law 100-307).

In the years since, prayer has often been the “canary in the coal mine” for freedom of religion in the U.S. Until the advent of the same-sex marriage debate, public prayer was most often the main conduit of attacks on religion. Perhaps due to its common usage, many people have come to incorrectly think that the phrase “separation of church and state,” is in the U. S. Constitution. It is not. The first amendment of the U. S Constitution states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;...” These two phrases are known as the ‘establishment clause’ and the ‘free exercise clause.’ In the minds of many U.S citizens, over decades and across the nation, the phrase “wall of separation between church and state” has overshadowed the constitutional protection of religion. The wall of separation statement was originally coined by Thomas Jefferson in a letter to the Danbury, Connecticut Baptists in 1802 assuring them that “I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.” Jefferson’s purpose in the letter was to assure the congregants that a wall had been erected to protect them, to keep the government away from religion, not to silence people of faith. Both the free exercise clause and the establishment clause place restrictions on the government

regarding religion, neither places restrictions on people of faith.

Running contrary to this history, the current use of the concept “separation of church and state” has been to keep the expression of personal faith out of the public square. The constitutional principle protecting the personal expression of faith from the state has too frequently been missing in the media, the judiciary, and the public debate, resulting in a growing concern about freedom of religion in our country. This battle has often taken place around prayer, with prohibitions on “the free exercise thereof” proliferating against prayer in school, prayer in the military, prayer before public meetings, and prayer in Congress. People of faith have many times been silenced in the public square, so it is refreshing to note that since the turn of the century there seems to have been a slow, quiet drumbeat pushing back hostility towards religion (the wall of separation) with the true constitutional mandate for religious freedom (make no law.....prohibiting the free expression thereof). The objections of groups like the Freedom from Religion Foundation have at times obscured that progress, but it is real. There is a congressional prayer room and a Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation. An attempt to overturn the National Day of Prayer legislation failed in court; our First Lady prays in public; faith leaders pray over President Trump in the white house, and President Trump declared a special Day of Prayer amid the coronavirus crisis. Also, during the pandemic, social media sites have been flooded with prayer, giving new life to the old adage “there are no atheists in foxholes.” It is a heartwarming reminder that hope, expressed through prayer, lives in the human heart and those determined to snuff it out or force it underground toil in vain.

Below are links to a small sampling of rulings and events illustrating the resurgence of prayer in American Society, as well as links to two notable presidential prayers. It is important to note that nowhere in any of these prayers or events is anyone forced into a state religion. Simple tolerance for the faith of others is what is desperately needed and so vehemently resisted.

D-day Prayer, President Franklin D. Roosevelt

June 6, 1944 Radio Address

President Bush Declares a National Day of Prayer and Remembrance for the Victims of the Terrorist Attacks on September 11, 2001

September 13, 2001

9-11 Prayer, President George W. Bush

September 14, 2001

The Presidential Prayer Team

Formed in 2001

Prayer Groups Proliferate on Capitol Hill

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Newly Formed Congressional Prayer Caucus Issues a “Call to Prayer for America”

Read the Call to Prayer

November 18, 2005, © Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation, Inc

U.S. Supreme Court backs prayer before government meetings

May 5, 2014, Lawrence Hurley

DC Circuit rightly rules prayer in Congress is constitutional

April 26, 2019, Nicole Russell

Trump protecting public school prayer is 'beginning of the end of war on faith'

January 17, 2020, Caleb Parke