

# National Day Of Prayer Questions & Answers

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*The National Day of Prayer (NDP) is an official religious observance mandated by the federal government. The NDP was established as an annual event by an act of Congress in 1952. Before then, there were occasional instances of official prayer proclamations by Congress and the presidents. In 1988, at the behest of the Religious Right, Congress officially set the date of the annual event as the first Thursday in May.*

*This Q&A examines some of the constitutional concerns surrounding the National Day of Prayer.*

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## **What's wrong with an official National Day of Prayer?**

There's nothing wrong with Americans engaging in voluntary religious worship; that's what the First Amendment is all about. Every day, millions of people of different faith traditions worship in their own way, without aid or interference from the government.

The NDP, however, is an official religious observance, through which the government urges all Americans to pray. That undermines the separation of church and state. It isn't the job of government to promote or encourage religious worship through official prayer days; it's the job of religious leaders. People of faith are more than capable of making up their own minds about when to pray and what to pray for; they don't need "help" from the government.

## **What is the National Day of Prayer Task Force?**

Over the last decade, the NDP Task Force has taken the lead in organizing and promoting NDP events, and coordinates virtually all of the prayer day events in Washington, D.C., and around the country. The Task Force claims that it organized 30,000 observances of the NDP last year.

The NDP Task Force, however, is a private nonprofit group that is part of the Religious Right. It is headed by Shirley Dobson, wife of Religious Right broadcaster James Dobson and operates from the headquarters of Dobson's Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs, Colo. In recent years, the Task Force's events have reflected a fundamentalist Christian view of the world and advanced the claim that America is a Christian nation.

## **Is the NDP Task Force affiliated with the federal government?**

The Task Force does not have formal ties to the government, but the group has assumed a pseudo-official role. In 2002, for example, the Task Force used the Cannon House Office Building on Capitol Hill to host its NDP event for Washington, D.C. Representatives of all three branches of federal government, as well as a representative from the military, spoke at the event. Moreover, the former Senate chaplain wrote the group's NDP prayer.

In 2001, President George W. Bush actively participated in Task Force efforts, personally hosting the group's religious observances in the nation's capital. In addition, Bush held a prayer day event at the White House featuring Religious Right leaders such as James and Shirley Dobson, Jerry Falwell and Richard Land.

## **Is it true that a taxpayer-financed chaplain wrote the official prayer for 2002's NDP Task Force?**

In 2002, Lloyd Ogilvie, former chaplain of the United States Senate, wrote a "Prayer For America" for the NDP Task Force. Ogilvie's prayer, which Religious Right activists urged all Americans to recite at 12 noon on May 2, was written to "acknowledge [God's] sovereignty." The prayer asked God to grant "supernatural powers" to the

president and Congress and called on the nation "to be faithful to You as Sovereign of our land and as our personal Lord and Savior."

"We rededicate ourselves to be one nation under You," Ogilvie's prayer said. "In You we trust. We reaffirm our accountability to You, to the absolutes of Your Commandments, and to justice in our society."

**Isn't the Senate chaplain a publicly financed position?**

Yes, at the time Ogilvie was a minister serving as a pastor to members of the Senate, and taxpayers finance his salary. In fact, the federal budget in 2002 allotted \$288,000 to Ogilvie's office.

**Are NDP events open to people of all religious traditions?**

Events organized by the NDP Task Force are for Christians who share the Religious Right's fundamentalist perspective. While NDP Task Force materials claim, "The National Day of Prayer belongs to all Americans," the group says its events are exclusively for Christians. This is identical to the approach the Task Force has taken in recent years. In 1999, for example, the Task Force's NDP materials said the group's events were intended for a Christian audience and said every NDP volunteer "must be a Christian" with "a personal relationship with Christ." The group even said event organizers should limit access to the microphone at NDP events to church leaders who believe in "salvation by grace alone" and who "have a personal relationship with Christ."

**Is the Religious Right supporting the NDP?**

Absolutely. In recent years, NDP materials have included revisionist history crafted by Religious Right propagandists. In 2002, the NDP Task Force promoted a statement from Jay Sekulow, head of TV preacher Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice, which argued government promotion of religion is both legal and useful. Sekulow's essay defended the NDP by saying, "The U.S. Supreme Court has repeatedly determined that the First Amendment protects religious speech." Of course, religious liberty activists respond that Sekulow's argument misses the point. No one is arguing that Americans don't have the right to pray for the nation. Advocates of church-state separation merely argue that citizens don't need the government to give them instruction on when and how to pray.

**Is President Bush involved with promoting an official prayer day?**

In 2002 Bush issued a White House proclamation on the NDP. It called "upon the Almighty to continue to bless America and her people" and asked Americans to "seek moral and spiritual renewal." The president's proclamation also cited a quotation from the Christian scriptures.

**Do all U.S. governors issue prayer proclamations in honor of NDP?**

According to Focus on the Family, only one governor refused to issue a NDP proclamation in 2002: Jesse Ventura (I-Minn.). Ironically, Jim Weidmann, vice chairman of the NDP Task Force, replied to Ventura's inaction by telling Focus that "citizens don't need a governor's proclamation to pray." Coincidentally, that's exactly what advocates of church-state separation believe, leaving many to wonder why citizens need an official prayer day if they already can pray whenever they wish. Even without a decree from the governor's desk, the people of Minnesota were able to pray, or not pray, based on the dictates of their beliefs and conscience.

**What did the Founding Fathers think of government prayer proclamations?**

Key Founders such as James Madison and Thomas Jefferson thought presidential prayer day proclamations were violations of the constitutional separation of church and state.

Jefferson, the nation's third president and a leading visionary on religious liberty, refused to issue prayer proclamations during his two terms in the White House. Writing to the Rev. Samuel Miller in 1808, Jefferson said, "Fasting and prayer are religious exercises; the enjoining them an act of discipline. Every religious society has a right to determine for itself the times for these exercises, and the objects proper for them, according to their own

particular tenets; and this right can never be safer than in their own hands, where the Constitution has deposited it."

Madison, widely recognized by historians as the "Father of the Constitution," also considered prayer proclamations to be inappropriate. Although Madison issued a few "prayer day" proclamations while president under political pressure from Congress, he later said such proclamations are inappropriate. In a collection of writings referred to as the "Detached Memoranda," Madison said religious proclamations by the government "seem to imply and certainly nourish the erroneous idea of a national religion." He also wrote that it is problematic for the government to use its authority to intervene in religion and that public officials lack "an advisory trust from their Constituents in their religious capacities."

### **Are government-sponsored prayers constitutional?**

Court rulings have been mixed on this issue. On multiple occasions, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled against government-sponsored prayer when the religious exercises are held in public schools. However, in a controversial 1983 decision, the justices ruled 6 to 3 that the Nebraska legislature can hire a chaplain to open legislative sessions with prayer.

Lower court rulings have also varied. Judges have frequently drawn the line at use of public resources to organize prayer events. In 2002, a federal district court in Georgia ruled that a city official could legally host a prayer breakfast, so long as there was no official sponsorship by the local government, a prohibition that included use of public funds, employees, facilities or supplies to subsidize the religious events.

Courts have also barred official religious observances that favor specific faith traditions. In 1999, a federal district court in Arizona ruled against a town proclamation issued to honor "National Bible Week."

### **So what's the bottom line?**

The Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said, "It is wholly inconsistent with the principles of the First Amendment for the government to set aside a special 'prayer day' for the nation. Americans don't need official instruction from politicians on when and how to pray."

AU's Lynn noted that the NDP Task Force in 2002 gave the NDP the theme of "America United Under God."

"Americans and their government are united, but under the Constitution, not some kind of government-imposed religion," Lynn concluded at that time. "On May 2, people should pray, or not pray, based on their beliefs. It simply isn't any of the government's business."

Americans United is a religious liberty watchdog group based in Washington, D.C. Founded in 1947, the organization educates Americans about the importance of church-state separation in safeguarding religious freedom.

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