

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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Sent Via Fax 202/456-2461 and U.S. Mail

The Honorable Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

On behalf of the more than 17,500 members the Freedom From Religion Foundation represents nationwide, we urge you to disassociate yourself from the National Prayer Breakfast on Thursday, February 2, 2012. FFRF is an educational association of freethinkers (atheists, agnostics) which works to safeguard the constitutional principle of the separation between religion and government, and to represent the views of our nonreligious membership.

The National Day of Prayer Breakfast lends the unmistakable appearance that the White House itself is cosponsoring the event, working hand in glove with the ultra-right wing Christian group, The Fellowship Foundation, also known as “the Family.” This group, apparently originated the breakfast to mix religion and state in the early 1950s. A series of Congressional violations stemming from that decade, many championed by The Fellowship Foundation as well as other religious entities, have resulted in serious breaches to the treasured Jeffersonian “wall of separation between church and state.” On behalf of our membership and the 46 million or more adult Americans who identify as nonreligious, the Foundation is seeking to repeal many of these McCarthy-esque vestiges that unite government with religion — usually with the Christian religion.

The Establishment Clause in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibits government sponsorship of religious messages. The Supreme Court has said time and again, that the “First Amendment mandates government neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary County, Ky. v. American Civil Liberties Union of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Board of Ed. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15-16 (1947). By serving as a de facto sponsor and figurehead for a “National Prayer Breakfast,” you lend the President’s power and imprimatur to this theo-political and unabashedly religious function. The event sends a message that the President prefers and endorses the Christian faith. Moreover, these actions exclude and offend the significant portion of the population that is non-Christian (24%) including non-religious (15%). (American Religious Identification Survey 2008, Trinity College.)

The inclusion of other faiths at government-promoted or sponsored National Prayer Breakfast still excludes those of us with no religious faith — the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification. The National Prayer Breakfast “sends the ancillary message to members of the audience who are nonadherents ‘that they are outsiders, not full

members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.’ ” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309-310 (2000)(quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*).

There is a necessary distinction between private speech (which may take any position on religion) and governmental speech (which may not be religious or take a religious position) — a distinction that many antagonistic to the Establishment Clause refuse to acknowledge. The National Prayer Breakfast does not make this distinction. The website for the 2012 breakfast lists “The President of the United States [and] Members of Congress” as attendees; it even sports the Congressional Seal. Clearly, the attendance of these officials is in their official capacity, not as private citizens. As President you have taken an oath of office to uphold the secular U.S. Constitution, and care must be taken to avoid the appearance of using your public office to promote or advance your personal religious beliefs, or religion over non-religion.

The separation between state and church is among one of the most fundamental principles of our system of government. The United States Supreme Court has wisely noted:

“If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that *no official*, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.” *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnett*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943).(emphasis added)

Instead of lending endorsement to an event organized to unite religion and government, we encourage you instead to use your “bully pulpit” to celebrate and advance freedom of conscience and the separation between state and church.

The entanglement of the Office of the President with the National Prayer Breakfast is inappropriate and unnecessary. Promotion of prayer by elected officials and alliances with theological groups raise the distasteful appearance of political pandering to a vocal Christian evangelical constituency. At the same time, religious right groups use the appearance of governmental endorsement to promote their agenda, with the danger of co-opting the credibility and prestige of the Office of the President.

We request that you honor the oath you took to uphold our godless Constitution, leaving religion to the private sphere, and cancel your plan to “bless” this sectarian event.

Very truly,

  
Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor

Attachment