

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 • MADISON, WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • WWW.FFRF.ORG

November 4, 2021

The Honorable Joseph Biden  
The President  
White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Washington, DC 20500

Re: Please do not attend the 2022 National Prayer Breakfast

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to strongly encourage you not to attend the 2022 National Prayer Breakfast. FFRF is a national nonprofit association with more than 35,000 members across the country, including members in every state. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

It has become something of a tradition for presidents to speak at the annual National Prayer breakfast. You attended and spoke virtually at this year's event. Although the event is hyped as a neutral and solemn forum for political, social, and business leaders to gather and pray together, the reality is very different. We are writing to make you aware of serious issues with this event, with more problems coming to light every year.

## **The Breakfast is a pay-to-play political event with a troubling history.**

The shadowy Fellowship Foundation organizes the event. The organization has had a pattern of troubling relationships with dictators around the world<sup>1</sup> and actively exports anti-LGBTQ legislation and policy.<sup>2</sup> Originally founded to oppose the New Deal,<sup>3</sup> the event is now the sole, public networking event for the secretive group. The Fellowship Foundation, also known as The Family, and its often anti-democratic agenda was devastatingly exposed by an insider in a 2008 bestselling book and Netflix documentary.<sup>4</sup> New records reveal that Rev. Franklin Graham is currently the primary financial backer of the event, which he admitted is meant to buy access: "They're wanting to be able to

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Sharlet, *The Family: Power, Politics and Fundamentalism's Shadow Elite*, e.g. pp. 24, 215–245, (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Laurie Goodstein, *National Prayer Breakfast Draws Controversy*, New York Times (Feb. 3, 2010), <https://nyti.ms/3mhpavt>.

<sup>3</sup> National Public Radio, *Family: Fundamentalism, Friends In High Places* (July 1, 2009), <https://n.pr/3pFZR8v>.

<sup>4</sup> Sharlet, *The Family*.

rub elbows with somebody that they normally couldn't rub elbows with.”<sup>5</sup> A notorious example of how the event is manipulated for political reasons concerns My Pillow CEO Mike Lindell, who credits his rise and relationship with President Trump to being “picked out of 12 people to pray with Ben Carson in a room [at] the National Prayer Breakfast.”<sup>6</sup> Another example is Maria Butina, an unregistered foreign agent with ties to Vladimir Putin, who used the event to illegally “back channel” with American officials who attended.<sup>7</sup> Butina pleaded guilty and was convicted in 2018.

Graham justified this pay-to-play scheme by pointing to “the gays, they do everything they can to get their politicians into office.”<sup>8</sup> That anti-LGBTQ rhetoric is baked into the event and its organizers. Recent stories have documented how the foreign officials who join the event are often less-than-official and virulently anti-LGBTQ.<sup>9</sup> European LGBTQ groups like Forbidden Colours are objecting to this international influence.<sup>10</sup>

We recognize that although many speakers and sponsors of the event have no such agenda, unfortunately it is hard not to conclude that they have been exploited to give a patina of respectability and harmony to the event.

### **Officially sponsoring a religious event violates the Constitution.**

In addition to its troubling history and secretive organizers, the National Prayer Breakfast is not the benign “ecumenical” gathering it parades as, but a sectarian religious event. Government officials who attend the event in their official capacity regrettably and perhaps inadvertently communicate that their office endorses the religious message, in violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

The Supreme Court has held that government officials violate the First Amendment if they even appear to endorse religion. *See, e.g., Capitol Square Review and Advisory Bd. v. Pinette*, 515 U.S. 753, 787 (1995) (Souter, J., concurring) (“Effects matter to the Establishment Clause, and one, principal way that we assess them is by asking whether the practice in question creates the appearance of endorsement to the reasonable observer.”); *Cty. of Allegheny v. Am. Civil Liberties Union Greater Pittsburgh Chapter*, 492 U.S. 573, 593–94 (1989) (“The Establishment Clause, at the very least, prohibits government from appearing to take a position on questions of religious belief . . .”).

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Larsen, *So who's bankrolling the National Prayer Breakfast? Evangelical superstar Franklin Graham*, Salon (Oct. 13, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3mffnWF>.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Boggioni, *Lindell claims a "prophet guy" predicted he would change history before his first meeting with Trump*, Salon (June 20, 2021), <https://bit.ly/2ZzP5Ga>.

<sup>7</sup> Katherine Stewart, *What Was Maria Butina Doing at the National Prayer Breakfast?*, The New York Times (July 18, 2018), <https://nyti.ms/3BlqPnV>.

<sup>8</sup> Eliza Griswold, *Franklin Graham's Uneasy Alliance with Donald Trump*, The New Yorker (Sept. 11, 2018), [www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/franklin-grahams-uneasy-alliance-with-donald-trump](http://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/franklin-grahams-uneasy-alliance-with-donald-trump).

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Larsen, *Why did prominent Democrats invite anti-LGBTQ Ukrainians to National Prayer Breakfast?*, Salon (Oct. 5, 2021), <https://bit.ly/3Em9BZD>.

<sup>10</sup> Forbidden Colours, *Anti-LGBTIQ Initiatives Adapting To Post-Trump World Order*, <https://bit.ly/3GoIcbr>.

Using the power and prestige of public office to promote sectarian religious events, or to spread religious messages, violates the spirit of this constitutional obligation.

Mr. President, you represent a diverse population that consists not only of Christians, but citizens with nonreligious views. At the 2021 Prayer Breakfast, you said: “For so many in our nation, this is a dark, dark time. So where do we turn? Faith.” Such language divides the country along religious lines. We understand that you turn to faith in dark times, and that is absolutely your prerogative. But many millions of good, law-abiding, tax-paying Americans who are not religious do not find solace in faith. Official presidential participation in a sectarian religious event, and official presidential remarks like this signal to nonreligious Americans that we are outsiders. Endorsing religious events and spreading religious messages in your official capacity alienates the 30 percent of Americans who are non-Christians,<sup>11</sup> including the one in four citizens who is not religious. Among millennials and younger Americans, 44 percent are non-Christian, most of them likewise without religion.<sup>12</sup> Religion only unites adherents; everyone else is excluded.

### **Conclusion**

Influence-peddling. Russian operatives. An anti-equality ethos. Shadowy organizers with connections to dictators. Lack of transparency. Any of these are reason enough to avoid official ties with this event. Given the sectarian religious nature, the National Prayer Breakfast is no place for our President and Commander in Chief.

Certainly, any public official who does attend must take steps to ensure that they are clearly doing so in their personal capacity—their office should not sponsor the event, and they should not agree to be a speaker or otherwise lend the prestige of public office to the event. Please do not continue to attend or speak at this event in the future, or send representatives in your stead.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter and for upholding the vital constitutional principle of separation between state and church.

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker  
Co-presidents

ALG/DB:als/rdj

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<sup>11</sup> Robert P. Jones; Daniel Cox, America’s Changing Religious Identity, PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (Sept. 6, 2017), available at [www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf](http://www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> America’s Changing Religious Landscape, PEW RESEARCH CENTER (May 12, 2015), available at [www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/](http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/).