



American Muslim Perspective

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AMP Comment - April 30, 2008

Evangelicals hijack the National Day of Prayer

Opinion 2008

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Opinion 2007

Opinion 2006

"Evangelicals attempt to exclude non-Christians from National Day of Prayer," this Mother Jones headline best reflects the controversy over the National Day of Prayer (NDP) observed this year on Thursday, May 1, 2008.

Press Center 2008

W The National Day of Prayer (NDP) was once a symbol of American unity and faith in God that transcended boundaries but in recent years the decades-old tradition has become mired in divisions.

Press Center 2007

Press Center 2006

The holiday began in 1775, when the Continental Congress asked Americans to pray for guidance as it was trying to birth a nation. Abraham Lincoln called for a day of fasting and prayer in 1863. Nearly a century later, Harry Truman made it an annual event, and in 1988, Ronald Reagan set aside the first Thursday in May so citizens could join in worship across all religious boundaries.

Press Center 2005

Press Center 2003-04

That changed in the 1990s, when the National Day of Prayer Committee established a task force to help coordinate activities across the country and connected it with Colorado's Focus on the Family. The conservative group, led by prominent evangelical James Dobson, took charge of the day, then insisted that all participants adhere to its "Judeo-Christian" theological tenets. Shirley Dobson, wife of James Dobson is the chairperson of the Task Force since 1991.

Election watch 2008

Election watch 2006

Holy Land charity trial

The Task force's website says that the National Day of Prayer Task Force was a creation of the National Prayer Committee for the expressed purpose of organizing and promoting prayer observances conforming to a Judeo-Christian system of values. People with other theological and philosophical views are, of course, free to organize and participate in activities that are consistent with their own beliefs.

A Task Force volunteer must be an evangelical Christian who has a personal relationship with Christ. According to the Task force website the applicants must indicate whether their lives reflect a belief statement that begins: "I believe that the Holy Bible is the inerrant Word of The Living God. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the only One by which I can obtain salvation and have an ongoing relationship with God."

Thanks to Dobson, this year's task force volunteers are required to sign pledges, stating: "I commit that National Day Prayer activities I serve with will be conducted solely by Christians while those of differing beliefs are welcome to attend."

Even though prayer day events are sponsored by a private organization, observances receive unofficial government approval through a proclamation by the President and ceremonies held at the White House and in Congress. President George W. Bush's official National Day of Prayer proclamation used the same theme as the Dobson's Task Force "Prayer! America's Strength & Shield." A large number of governors have also issued proclamations adopting the National Day of Prayer Task Force's theme.

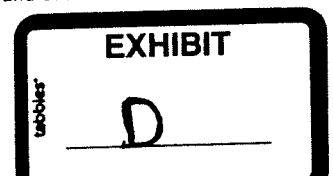
This year, the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), a leading Muslim civil rights group joined Jews On First, in calling on American Muslims and members of other faith communities to contact governors and other elected officials nationwide to ask that any government-sponsored "National Day of Prayer" observances on May 1st be representative of our nation's religious diversity.

There have been several national days of prayer in the U.S. before the day was made official in 1952. The Continental Congress issued a day of prayer in 1775 to designate "a time for prayer in forming a new nation". Thomas Jefferson argued however, that although individual religious organizations had the right to designate a day of prayer, the U.S. government should not have that right.

On April 17, 1952, President Harry S. Truman signed a bill proclaiming the National Day of Prayer into law. It was in 1972 that the National Prayer Committee was formed. It went on to create the National Day of Prayer Task Force, with the intended purpose of coordinating events for the National Day of Prayer. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed a bill into law decreeing that the National Day of Prayer should be held on the first Thursday of May.

The intention of the National Day of Prayer was always that it would be a day when members of all faiths could pray together in their own way. It would involve Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Aborigines, Zoroastrians, and all others who had a religious faith and wished to participate.

It was meant to encourage Americans of all faiths to pray with one another in whatever way felt best to them. It would be an ecumenical celebration of faith that would draw people together in common religious and spiritual contemplation. However, Dobson has made a point of "excluding Jews, Muslims, Catholics, Buddhists, and even mainline Christians" from the National Day of Prayer.



The United States is generally recognized as being the most religiously diverse nation in the world. Holding National Day of Prayer events which are inclusive of all religions may go a long way towards promoting interfaith understanding.

Unfortunately, what began as President Truman's declaration of a National Prayer Day for all Americans is now excluding and dividing us on religious lines.