



FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

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April 26, 2010

The Honorable Dr Robert M Gates
Secretary of Defense
Department of Defense
1400 Defense Pentagon
Washington DC 20301-1400

Re: Pentagon Must Cancel National Day of Prayer Event

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On behalf of our national membership, we are asking you to cancel the Pentagon National Day of Prayer event scheduled for May 6. In light of the federal court decision on April 15 striking down the National Day of Prayer as unconstitutional, it is essential that the Pentagon distance itself from such an inappropriate entanglement with religion and specifically with Christianity. The Freedom From Religion Foundation ("FFRF"), a national nonprofit educational organization, works to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church. We represent more than 14,500 members across the country, including currently active and former members of the U.S. military.

We respectfully request that you take immediate steps to ensure that no Pentagon officials or employees organize, promote or participate in a Pentagon National Day of Prayer event in their official capacity. Official government participation in religious ritual and proselytizing activities violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

The Pentagon disinvited the Rev. Franklin Graham to speak at the Pentagon National Day of Prayer event following public outcry and media exposure of his scheduled appearance. Pentagon spokespersons admit that Franklin Graham's comments on Islam were "inappropriate." It is not enough to distance the Pentagon from inappropriate anti-Muslim statements. The Pentagon must now distance itself from the equally inappropriate National Day of Prayer itself.

The National Day of Prayer is the creation of evangelical Christian lobbies and their Congressional supporters. Rev. Billy Graham, Franklin's father, proposed the annual Presidential Proclamation in 1952 in order to promote "the Lord Jesus Christ" across the land. Evangelical groups lobbied in 1988 to make the National Day of Prayer a fixed date to better promote events tying together government and religion, specifically evangelical Christianity. The National Day of Prayer has no secular meaning or purpose.

In *Freedom From Religion Foundation v. Obama*, No. 08-588, 2010 WL 1499451 (W.D. Wis. 2010), Judge Crabb struck down the National Day of Prayer statute and enjoined the President and his press secretary from issuing an annual proclamation. The District Court found that the "sole purpose [of the National Day of Prayer] is to encourage all citizens to engage in prayer, an inherently religious exercise that serves no secular function in this context. In this instance, the government has taken sides on a matter that must be left to the individual conscience." *FFRF v. Obama*, 2010 WL 1499451, at *2. The National Day of

Prayer event at the Pentagon sends a message of military endorsement of its religious message, which, since its inception, has been a Christian message.

Task Force chairwoman Shirley Dobson was quoted recently as saying, "We at the National Day of Prayer Task Force ask the American people to defend the right to pray in the Pentagon." No such right exists. Military personnel have an individual right to the free exercise of religion, but not to use the imprimatur or property of the government or military to promote personal religious views. We understand that the military goes to great lengths to ensure that members of the armed forces are able to practice their religion. However, a day of prayer at the Pentagon goes far beyond accommodation.

No Pentagon official can officially support or promote the National Day of Prayer, "any more than the government may encourage citizens to fast during the month of Ramadan, attend a synagogue, purify themselves in a sweat lodge or practice rune magic. In fact, it is because the nature of prayer is so personal and can have such a powerful effect on a community that the government may not use its authority to try to influence an individual's decision whether and when to pray." *Id.*

Official military sponsorship of the National Day of Prayer event inappropriately excludes nonbelievers and alienates non-Christians. All members of the military take an oath of office to uphold the entirely secular and godless Constitution, whose only references to religion are exclusionary (such as that there can be no religious test for public office). The Pentagon should be sending a clear signal that its mission is to defend the Constitution, not to promote religion and prayer.

At least 15% of the American population is nonreligious (American Religious Identification Survey 2008). The message from the Pentagon becomes, "'Americans' pray; if you do not believe in the power of prayer, you are not a true American." *Id.* at *14. Official Pentagon support for a National Day of Prayer sends the impermissible message to nonreligious members of the armed forces and to nonreligious Americans that they are political outsiders.

Pentagon support of the National Day of Prayer is alarming and inappropriate on multiple levels. We urge you to end Pentagon sponsorship of religious events.

May we hear from you at your earliest convenience?

Very truly,



Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor
Co-Presidents