

Christians mark National Day of Prayer, atheists host National Day of Reason

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c. 2012 Religion News Service WASHINGTON (RNS) Americans marked the National Day of Prayer Thursday (May 3), with Christians gathering on Capitol Hill to defend their right to pray as nonbelievers observed a "Day of Reason."

Shirley Dobson, wife of Focus on the Family founder James Dobson and the chairwoman of the National Day of Prayer Task Force, said the total of 40,000 observances across the U.S. for the National Day of Prayer "belies the fact of many skeptics saying that citizens in our nation no longer believe in prayer."

The American Humanist Association used Thursday to mark the National Day of Reason, and encouraged atheists, agnostics and nonbelievers to give blood or participate in counter demonstrations.

The annual observance on Capitol Hill featured more than three hours of worship and prayer for the nation's leaders and the military. But when it came time to pray for the executive branch, Bishop Harry Jackson, a Maryland megachurch pastor, critiqued the Obama administration for not defending the Defense of Marriage Act and urged prayer for "clarity of mission."

The White House did not send a representative to speak at the gathering, but as has been his practice, President Obama issued a proclamation to mark the prayer day.

"On this National Day of Prayer, we give thanks for our democracy that respects the beliefs and protects the religious freedom of all people to pray, worship, or abstain according to the dictates of their conscience," Obama said in his proclamation of the day, which was enacted into law in 1952.

Shin Inouye, a White House spokesman, said the president celebrates "prayer and faith through events like his recent Easter Prayer Breakfast" and "prays daily and deeply appreciates the important role that prayer plays in the lives of millions of Americans."