

Day of prayer marked with dissenting views

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Supporters marked the 60th annual National Day of Prayer on May 5, just weeks after a federal appeals court dismissed a suit that challenged the law creating the day as unconstitutional.

Focus on

the Family founder James Dobson spoke of the "poignant moment" for the annual gathering on Capitol Hill after a federal court last year had cast uncertainty about future observances. "Millions of people prayed, and many of them here in this room, and God heard and answered prayer and here we are today!" said Dobson, husband of Shirley Dobson, chairwoman of the National Day of Prayer Task Force.

While similar

events took place in churches, on military bases and on courthouse steps across the country, about 400 people at the Washington observance prayed for relief from natural disasters and thanked God for the capture and death of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

"We are blessed to

have the best military and the most sophisticated weaponry in the world," Shirley Dobson said. "They put their lives on the line to assure that justice was done."

President Obama, who discontinued his

predecessor's annual observances at the White House, nonetheless issued a proclamation under the 1988 law that designates the first Thursday in May as the National Day of Prayer.

Church-state separation groups continued to oppose the observances.

"It is bad manners and worse law for Congress and the president to exhort citizens to 'turn to God in prayer,' as the 1952 law enacting a National Day of Prayer does," said Annie Laurie Gaylor, copresident of the Freedom from Religion Foundation, which recently lost the case about the observance.

Officials at the Baptist Joint Committee said official National Day of Prayer declarations are misguided and unnecessary. "The government shouldn't be in the business of telling the American people what, where or when to pray or even if they should pray," said J. Brent Walker, executive director of the 75-year-old religious liberty organization.

The annual observance does not represent a cataclysmic breach in the wall of separation between church and state, added K. Hollyn Hollman, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee. "There is little if any coercion of anyone's conscience," she said. But she added, "actual coercion" has never been the standard to judge whether or not government has overstepped its bounds in establishing religion.

Rep. Allen West (R., Fl.), who said that the Navy SEALs prayed before entering bin Laden's compound in Pakistan, defended the observances against opposition from advocates of church-state separation.

"That principle does not apply to separating me or any of us from our faith and belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," he said, drawing a standing ovation. "It does not apply to separating this great nation from its Judeo-Christian faith heritage."

Task force officials invited former Sen. Elizabeth Dole to speak "on behalf of" the executive branch, in lieu of a representative from the current administration. Dole, who served as secretary of transportation during Ronald Reagan's administration, spoke of Reagan's reliance on prayer, support of religious tolerance and belief in "how good can triumph over evil." —RNS, ABP