

Prayer time: At the National Prayer Breakfast

by [William F. Schulz](#) in the [May 9, 2001](#) issue

For 49 years, presidents, members of Congress and thousands of invited guests have met annually in Washington, D.C., over orange juice and muffins to petition God to rain bipartisan blessings down on the United States and its incumbent-elect. The National Prayer Breakfast, held in the immense ballroom of the Washington Hilton, is a “see and be seen” event for politicians, to say nothing of well-scrubbed religious folk.

Though I was head of the Unitarian Universalist Association for eight years, I had never been to a National Prayer Breakfast, so I was intrigued when a well-placed friend invited me to be his guest. To claim one’s ticket, one must show up the day before the breakfast at a registration desk run by a cache of clean-cropped young men who could have been either Southern Baptist youth ministers or retired Mormon missionaries. Since many of their name tags read “Texas,” I concluded they were most likely Southern Baptists.

“You’re at table ten,” one of the men pointed out enthusiastically. “I’ve been here all day and that’s the lowest table I’ve given out yet—right under the president’s nose!” And then he added cheerily, “Be here by 7:15 in the morning or we lock the doors on ya!”

So at 7:00 a.m. sharp, I appeared at the Hilton. As a member of a distinctly minority faith, I had taken some comfort the night before when I saw two turbaned fellows—Sikhs, perhaps?—claiming their tickets at the registration desk. But in the morning there was no turban wearers to be seen. My eyes peeled for yarmulkes, dreadlocks or even love beads, I made my way to table ten only to find seated there the unlikely figure of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. Mrs. Bhutto was run out of office in 1996 on charges of corruption, economic incompetence and the sanctioning of police hit squads. I had no idea what she was doing at the Washington Prayer Breakfast. “You must help gain the release of my husband,” she

said when she learned of my affiliation with Amnesty International. “He is a prisoner of conscience.” What she did not say was that he had been convicted of stealing millions of dollars.

Table ten was indeed an enviable one, situated directly in front of the podium with only one other table between it and the dais. That other table was obviously the preferred one, however, for seated at it were Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Senator Orrin Hatch of Utah and other Republican dignitaries who were relishing the fact that they had received prime seating at a Prayer Breakfast after eight years in the back rows.

Table ten, proximate as it was to power, comprised a most peculiar retinue. To the right of the ex-prime minister of Pakistan sat the foreign minister of Albania. To my right sat the prime minister of Greenland, a dour man with whom I had no success at all in exchanging pleasantries.

Even stranger inhabitants lurked at other tables. Joseph Kabila, newly installed as president of the Democratic Republic of Congo following the assassination of his father, was present, as was his father’s archenemy, President Paul Kagame of Rwanda, whose troops were occupying large swaths of Kabila’s country. The two happened to be in Washington at the same time. Some hopeful soul must have thought that if they could share a prayer or two over granola, they might come to their senses. (Remarkably, shortly after the breakfast the two countries entered into a cease-fire.)

Before I could reflect more upon the vagaries of the guest list, Congressman Zach Wamp (R., Tenn.) emerged from backstage and, rather like the announcer at the start of the Indianapolis 500—“Gentlemen, start your engines!”—implored us to let the praying begin. For the next 45 minutes we were treated to a compendium of prayers both long (Fred Steelman of Red Bank Baptist Church in Tennessee) and short (Susan Baker, wife of former Secretary of State James Baker, whom Wamp introduced by saying, “There is no tougher job in Washington than to be the spouse of a powerful man”). New York Congressman Eliot Engel, the only Jew on the program, read from the Hebrew scriptures, and Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard of California, from the Christian. Assorted admirals and senators spoke inspirational words. The Chattanooga Singers and soloist Wintley Phipps delivered bang-up musical numbers, including Phipps’s rendition of a hymn composed by Senator Hatch. Wamp emceed, and at one point ruefully remarked that his

constituents continue to confuse him with the local weatherman. Throughout the proceedings Andrew Young, the only other clergyman on the dais, looked distinctly ill at ease, perhaps because he was surrounded by Republicans or because he was last on the program.

Finally, President and Mrs. Bush arrived. The president seemed utterly at ease in this quasi-ecclesiastical setting. Surprisingly, he offered no prayer himself but launched quickly into a tightly woven, well-delivered speech. He explained his proposed policy of subsidizing religiously sponsored social service programs with government funds. His message was well received by the audience, many of whom no doubt stood to benefit from the plan. Though some fear it may be unconstitutional, Bush apparently has no worries about that. "I'm interested in what is constitutional," he said, "and," he added with a pause, "I'm interested in what works." I thought it was a jarring note, but the lines evoked much applause.

Then Andrew Young finally had his turn. The president greeted Young with an embrace that would have done Bill Clinton proud—and Young evoked a presidential chuckle with the line, "Oh Lord, we know you have been working on this man for a long, long time." Wintley Phipps concluded the breakfast with a spectacular gospel number whose refrain of assurance that all was right with our souls appeared to bring tears to George Bush's eyes.

As I made my way to the exits, I thought how tricky the politicization of religious ritual always is. On the one hand, this was a genuinely bipartisan event (or as bipartisan as you can get with a Republican president and Congress). And it cannot be a bad thing for Americans of all political stripes to remind themselves of those eternal verities that transcend the petty differences of the everyday.

On the other hand, while the occasion is at least ostensibly designed to encompass a wide variety of faiths, it clearly does not. Despite the marked changes in the religious makeup of America since the breakfast was inaugurated in 1952, it is still a Christian event. George Washington's 1783 prayer for the United States, ending with "Grant our supplication, we beseech Thee, through Jesus Christ our Lord," served as the printed invocation and gave cover to many on the rostrum who concluded their own prayers in similar form. The brochure at each seat, which contained inspirational quotations as well as remarks delivered at prayer breakfasts past, included words from notable non-Christians Plato, Gandhi and Jefferson, but far more were in the vein of former Senator Sam Nunn's observation that "[Jesus] . . . gave us

the opportunity for redemption and the hope of eternal life.” There is of course nothing wrong with a National *Christian* Prayer Breakfast as long as everyone knows what they are paying for and taxpayers are not the ones doing it.

Something else was not quite right. Events like this pose less danger to the separation of church and state than to the reputation of prayer. When worship and religion of any hue are appropriated by the established powers, it is likely that their prophetic role will be compromised. How, after all, could we expect the prayer breakfast speakers—an admiral in the U.S. Navy, the wife of a former secretary of state, three members of the U.S. House of Representatives, two senators, the vice president and the president—to call down the wrath of God on the principalities and powers? Though that would make for an interesting morning, none of them are fools. They know that the more religion is put in service to the principality, the less threat it can be to the powerful. Maybe that’s why Andy Young looked so uncomfortable.