

Another year, another "prayer breakfast"

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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[Liz Lefebvre is right](#): President Obama had some refreshing things to say about humility at the National Prayer Breakfast yesterday. [So is Brian McLaren](#): the president's view of the relationship between faith and public life is compelling, and hard to fit into any of the old categories. (Though I don't think this is newly evident this week; it's been clear at least since his [2006 speech](#) at a Sojourners conference.) And [Alan Rudnick is right](#) that Obama did well to make specifically biblical/ethical arguments in favor of common-good policies.

To which I'll add that it was interesting to see the president speak unwelcome truth--about public-policy realities, about interfaith commonalities--to the event's [conservative-evangelical organizers](#) and their guests. Defenders of the breakfast have often [pointed to the opposite](#): religious leaders' opportunity to speak truth to a captive audience of political power.

None of this, however, makes up for the fact that the National Prayer Breakfast is not an inclusive, unifying time of genuine prayer. It's an invitation-only political event organized by a shadowy, highly ideological group--one with enough clout to compel presidents to show up, which gives the event quasi-official status.

But my problem with the breakfast isn't simply a secularist one, i.e. government officials should avoid any event with a smack of sectarianism. What I object to is the political exploitation of the importance of prayer in American life. Posturing for power and influence may be an inevitable part of democracy, but that's obviously very different from saying it's a form of prayer.

Obama may have given a better-than-average National Prayer Breakfast speech this week. But I [still think](#) the most impressive showing he could make would be to not show up at all. Not because a prayer-based event is somehow beneath his office, but because this particular event is merely *prayer-branded*. If presidents stopped showing up, it might finally go away.