

## What I heard at the National Prayer Breakfast

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Recently I did something for the first time: I attended the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington DC. Held annually since 1953, the breakfast is sponsored by [the Fellowship](#) (sometimes called “the Family”), a shadowy organization with connections especially to conservative members of Congress.

I went with my crap detectors on high alert. In addition to my cynicism about the sponsoring group, I expected an unholy blending of prayer and politics, piety and patriotism.

To my surprise, there wasn't much in the way of overt patriotism: there was no pledge of allegiance, no saluting of the flag, no national anthem. If there was an American flag anywhere, I missed it.

Ben Carson, a nationally respected pediatric neurosurgeon, was the keynote speaker. An African-American evangelical, Carson has a compelling story to tell. He was raised by a single mother in Detroit, and he said that she limited his and his brother's TV watching during the week. They went to the public library each week and took out books to read, and his mother expected them to write book reports and give them to her. Only later did they discover that she couldn't even read what they had written.

Conservatives loved [what Carson had to say](#), and not just because it confirmed their bias toward getting ahead by pulling up one's own bootstraps. Much of Carson's speech sounded like Republican talking points. He began with a nebulous jab at political correctness. With President Obama sitting a few feet away, he criticized the Affordable Care Act. He took aim at the national debt. And he pushed for what amounts to a flat income tax: appealing to the biblical tithe, he suggested that rich people shouldn't have to pay taxes at a higher rate than people of modest means. Carson's speech has even led some to suggest he should consider running for president in 2016.

Conservatives as different as Cal Thomas and John Stackhouse were critical of Carson's speech. Thomas, a nationally syndicated columnist, said Carson owes the President an apology for criticizing his policies at an event billed as nonpartisan. Stackhouse, a Canadian evangelical theologian, [critiqued Carson](#) for promoting a self-help gospel rather than the Christian one.

The President, regardless of party affiliation, is always expected to attend and [give a speech](#). President Obama got the last word, speech-wise. His demeanor was noticeably low key. His lack of a spirited presentation reminded me somewhat of his disastrous first debate with Mitt Romney last fall in Denver. A friend I attended with said the president's apparent lack of energy could just be an indication that he too is cynical about this event.

I found a couple aspects of Obama's speech to be noteworthy. He acknowledged his own Christian faith, while respectfully pointing out that there are good Americans of other faiths and others of no faith. He may just be remembered as the first U.S. president to appreciate religious pluralism. And his speech ended with a call for humility in politics—what I would call the most underrated virtue in public life. "Those of us with the most power and influence need to be the most humble," the president said.

At one point, Obama made what sounded like an off-the-cuff comment about how people come together for this occasion to pray, then go back to their offices and jobs and it's business as usual. It came off as part lament, part rebuke. Other than the scriptures read near the outset, it was the most truthful thing I heard at the prayer breakfast.