

National Day of Prayer

The National Day of Prayer is a day on which people of different faiths are invited to pray for the United States of America and its leaders. The date itself changes each year, as it is held on the first Thursday of May. In 2021, the day is acknowledged on Thursday, May 6th.

History

The very first day of prayer was declared in 1775 by the Continental Congress, which asked people to pray for the fledgling nation. This initial declaration gradually evolved into two formalized events. In 1863 President Lincoln oversaw the naming of the autumnal observance of prayer and thanks as Thanksgiving Day.¹

Almost a century later President Truman oversaw the establishment of the spring tradition of prayer and thanks as the National Day of Prayer in 1952. The intent of the Day was to honor the history of public prayer in the United States by designating a day for Americans to come together and pray or meditate according to their own belief systems.

In 1988, President Reagan amended the 1952 resolution to designate that the National Day of Prayer would be on the first Thursday in May.² Every year since then, the sitting U.S. President, regardless of party or denomination, has issued an official proclamation on the National Day of Prayer. Similarly, each of the 50 U.S. Governors issue annual proclamations. Many religious, interfaith and community groups hold events recognizing the day.

Observances

While the U.S. government officially recognizes the day, it does not mandate or provide any guidelines as to how the day should be observed. Organizations and people from any tradition can create a National Day of Prayer observance, including interfaith groups.

In some places, a local Chamber of Commerce or service organization (e.g., Kiwanis) may organize a day of community service or similar type of charitable event to celebrate the day. Individual temples, churches, mosques, gurdwaras, or other houses of worship may hold their own events or come together for an interfaith event.

Because the National Day of Prayer is completely voluntary, anyone can organize an event, from a prayer breakfast to a food drive to a moment of silence.

The National Day of Prayer Task Force

In 1983, the National Day of Prayer Task Force (NDP Task Force), a non-profit subsidiary of the evangelical Christian National Prayer Committee, was established. The NDP Task Force is dedicated to promoting the

¹ History [Online], National Day of Prayer. Available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Day_of_Prayer. (Accessed: May 2, 2019).

² History [Online], National Day of Prayer, Available at <https://nationaldayofprayer.org/history>. (Accessed: May 7, 2019).

National Day of Prayer around the country through prayer and events with a conservative Christian focus, as per its mission. The organization was not created by, nor is it endorsed by, the U.S. government.³

In many parts of the country, the only National Day of Prayer event is one sponsored by the NDP Task Force. As a result, many of those who do not identify with Christianity may feel excluded from participating.

Separation of Church and State

There are some people who feel that the National Day of Prayer violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” In 2008, the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) filed a lawsuit challenging the federal law designating the National Day of Prayer and the Presidential Proclamation, arguing that “Mandated prayer proclamations by the president exhorting each citizen to pray constitute an unabashed endorsement of religion.”⁴

In a lower court, the judge ruled that the National Day of Prayer was unconstitutional; however, that ruling was unanimously overturned by the Federal Appeals Court in April 2011. The Federal Appeals court found that the FFRF was unable to legally bring suit on this issue because the National Day of Prayer did not cause harm to the FFRF and “a feeling of alienation cannot suffice as injury.” The court decided that because each president can voluntarily choose to take action on the National Day of Prayer and each citizen can voluntarily engage in observance of the day, there is no legal imposition on citizens’ rights.⁵

Those who support the National Day of Prayer point to the long history of national prayer in the U.S. and argue that “separation of church and state” does not require a ban of religion in public life. They emphasize that the National Day of Prayer does not prefer any one religious denomination over another, is not mandatory, and is expressly *not* limited to any particular religious group.

National Day of Reason

In partnership with other secular and humanist organizations, the American Humanist Association began to observe the National Day of Reason beginning in 2003. Created in part to protest the National Day of Prayer, the National Day of Reason is also observed on the first Thursday in May. The goal of this day is to “celebrate reason – a concept all Americans can support – and to raise public awareness about the persistent threat to religious liberty posed by government intrusion into the private sphere of worship.”⁶

Within the past decade, government officials have begun to publically support the National Day of Reason, even pushing for an official resolution in 2015 to honor the day. Individuals who choose to observe the National Day of Reason often do so by donating blood or organizing food drives.

Implications for the Workplace

Both the National Day of Prayer and National Day of Reason are not public holidays, therefore, unless indicated otherwise, regular business hours at companies and in governments are adhered to on this date. As with other days of significance, some employees may choose to observe this day by taking time off of work.

³ Arave. L. The National Day of Prayer not without some controversy (May 1, 2010) [Online]. Desert News. Available at <https://www.deseret-news.com/article/700028730/The-National-Day-of-Prayer-not-without-some-controversy.html>. (Accessed: May 7, 2019).

⁴ Court: FFRF Suit Against Day of Prayer to Proceed (Vol. 27 No.3, April 2010) [Online]. Freedom From Religion Foundation. Available at <https://ffrf.org/publications/freethought-today/item/13480-court-ffrf-suit-against-day-of-prayer-to-proceed>. (Accessed: May 2, 2019).

⁵ *Court dismisses suit over National Day of Prayer* (April 14, 2011) [Online]. CBS News. Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20110416071913/http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2011/04/14/ap/national/main20054020.shtml>. (Accessed: May 7, 2019).

⁶ *National Day of Reason* [Online]. American Humanist Association. Available at <https://americanhumanist.org/what-we-do/national-day-of-reason/>. (Accessed: May 6, 2019).

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