

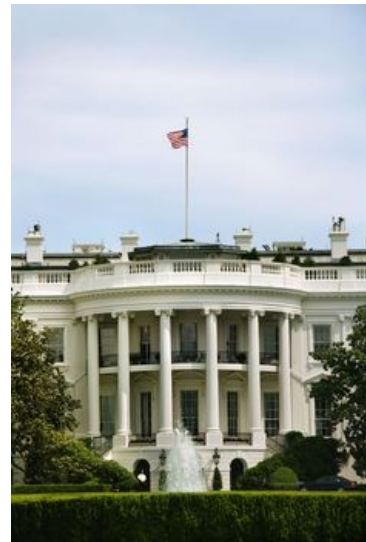
# This Prayer Approved by the White House?

Friday, February 27, 2009

Is the Obama White House vetting prayers? Dan Gilgoff of *U.S. News and World Report* reports that this represents a “new tradition” established by the administration of President Barack Obama. As Gilgoff revealed, “In a departure from previous presidents, his public rallies are opening with invocations that have been commissioned and vetted by the White House.”

The issue of public prayer is increasingly controversial in an age of religious diversity and increasing secularization. Yet, prayers at government ceremonies and events have been common since the nation’s founding and, until recently, few prayers related to White House events have been controversial. Radical church/state separationists consider these prayers to be improper and perhaps unconstitutional, but this is a hard case to make given the nation’s historic practice.

On the other hand, sign me up as an opponent of any prayer that is vetted by any government official or agency. For reasons having less to do with the Constitution and more to do with the nature of prayer, I cannot imagine that a Christian minister could in good conscience allow the government to edit or approve a prayer.



Gilgoff’s report contains some shocking details:

*During Obama’s recent visit to Fort Myers, Fla., to promote his economic stimulus plan, a black Baptist preacher delivered a prayer that carefully avoided mentioning Jesus, lest he offend anyone in the audience. And at Obama’s appearance last week near Phoenix to unveil his mortgage bailout plan, an administrator for the Tohono O’odham Nation delivered the prayer, taking the unusual step of writing it down so he could E-mail it to the White House for vetting. American Indian prayers are typically improvised.*

*Though invocations have long been commonplace at presidential inaugurations and certain events like graduations or religious services at which presidents are guests, the practice of commissioning and vetting prayers for presidential rallies is unprecedented in modern history, according to religion and politics experts.*

Consider what is at stake here. When the White House requires a prayer to be submitted in advance, it takes on an editorial role. This editorial role means that the White House is explicitly approving certain prayers for delivery. The prayer delivered in this context should bear a label that clearly identifies it as approved by the White House — government-approved prayer.

Gilgoff relates the experience of Ryan Culp in Elkhart, Indiana:

*The day before the president arrived in Elkhart, Culp spent an hour and a half crafting his prayer, roughly a minute and 20 seconds long, before calling an aide from the White House Office of Public Liaison to recite it for vetting, as the administration requested. “She said that it was beautiful and that there shouldn’t be a problem with it but that she would call in the morning if there was,” Culp recalls.*

*The White House had no revisions for the prayer, which opened with the line: “Dear Heavenly Father, we come to you this day thanking you for who you are—a God that cares about each of our needs, our desires, and our fears.” Culp delivered it the following day at Obama’s town hall meeting, landing a handshake from the president and mentions in several local papers.*

There is much here that can only be characterized as ominous and troubling. The White House official reported back to Mr. Culp that it “had no revisions for the prayer” after reviewing its content for several hours. But there is no rationale for this process unless the White House would, if dissatisfied with the proposed prayer, order some revision.

Gilgoff also reported the case of Pastor James Bing of Ft. Meyers, Florida. Earlier in his report, Gilgoff described the pastor as delivering “a prayer that carefully avoided mentioning Jesus, lest he offend anyone in the audience.” The pastor self-censored his prayer, explaining: “For some strange reason, the word *Jesus* is like pouring gasoline on fire for some people in this country . . . . You learn how to work around that.”

You learn how to work around that? How can any Christian pastor justify “working around” the name of Jesus out of fear of offending anyone? If the Christian cannot pray in the name of Jesus, let someone else deliver the prayer.

Interestingly, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki commented that the practice of vetting prayers had “been standard since the campaign.” This revelation raises a host of other questions. What about the prayers offered at President Obama’s inauguration? Did the administration approve or edit the prayers offered by pastors Rick Warren and Joseph Lowery?

Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, offered a most interesting response to the revelation that the Obama White House is vetting prayers: “The only thing worse than having these prayers in the first place is to have them vetted, because it entangles the White House in core theological matters.”

An ardent and radical Church/State separationist, Barry Lynn has argued that *no* prayers at government-sponsored events or ceremonies should be delivered, citing both constitutional and theological reservations. I rarely find myself in agreement with Barry Lynn, but I am with him on this issue — at least with respect to his argument that this practice “entangles the White House in core theological matters.”

Of course it does. When a White House approves or edits prayers, it has entered theological territory and takes on a theological function. The President of the United States is our Commander in Chief, not our Theologian in Chief.

The examples cited by Dan Gilgoff should be sufficiently troubling to evangelical Christians. Whether by self-censorship or censorship by the government, the integrity of prayer is subverted and prayer becomes an extension of government policy.

Tellingly, the administration is also timing the prayers so that they are heard by those present at the events, but not by the far larger audience watching via the media. As Gilgoff explains, “The Obama administration may have skirted controversy by scheduling the invocations to be delivered before the president arrives at the events—and before national cable network cameras start rolling.”

All this points to something the Obama administration — and anyone asked by the administration to offer a prayer — had better learn fast. The government has no authority and no proper role in the vetting of prayer. No Christian should allow any prayer to bear the label, “This prayer approved by the White House.”

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Disclosure: I offered invocations at public events sponsored by the White House in the administration of President George W. Bush. I prayed before President Bush delivered a speech on Social Security and before he addressed another event about domestic policy. On another occasion, I prayed before First Lady Laura Bush spoke to a group of community leaders. I was never asked about my prayer prior to its delivery and no one from the administration offered any guideline whatsoever — other than length.

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