

America's National Day of Prayer

5/3

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Today is, among other things, America's National Day of Prayer. National Day of Prayer (NDP) officially started in 1952. Today millions of Americans from many different faiths will unite in prayer from coast to coast... But first, let's back up and ask a serious question: do we *need* such a day? After all: Christians, Jews and Moslems, etc., pray every Day. Those who are not religious don't pray, and should not be forced to pray – so what's the point? Is this day really going to help heal our ~~sorely~~ divided nation?

Do we need a national day of prayer? First I'll say what kind of ~~that~~ prayer day we do not need, ~~because~~. We don't need civil religion: a combination of religion and state that uses religion as an instrument of the state, or the state as the sponsor of a particular brand of religion. This kind of religion tends to foster doctrinal disputes, and arrogant forms of nationalism ~~that~~ assume God is on our side and therefore wants us to win at war, succeed at business and have happy, insular families. America does not need that kind of religion or that kind of prayer.

But, there is an *other* kind of Prayer Day that reaches way back in our history. National days of prayer have precedents that go back to George Washington and the Continental Congress; that's right, George, before he was President, encouraged prayer for the nation back in 1775. Then, President John Adams encouraged prayer in 1789 during our conflict with the French. Adams declared May 9, 1798 as "a day of solemn humility, fasting, and prayer," during which citizens of all faiths were asked to pray "that our country may be protected from all the dangers which threaten it".

On March 30, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation expressing the idea "that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us, for our presumptuous sins", and designated the day of April 30, 1863 as a day of "national humiliation, fasting and prayer" in the hope that God would respond by restoring "our now divided and suffering Country, to its former happy condition of unity and peace" ~~(He went on to say, "...it is the duty of nations as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon, and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord.")~~

I find it instructive that the summons to national prayer by Washington, Adams, Lincoln were not triumphant drum rolls or sectarian proclamations. They were, rather, full of humble contrition for having committed sins of injustice on a wide scale. Lincoln believed the terrible conflict of the Civil war was God's punishment for the sin of slavery. These older prayers ~~were not triumphalist, haughty or sectarian. They~~ seemed a genuine expression of repentance and sorrow for sins: both personal and social—before Almighty God. These were not slick three piece suit prayers, but sack cloth and ashes prayers... Prayers of genuine contrition and sorrow for sins against those who were weak and disadvantaged.... I believe this kind of prayer is sorely needed in our sadly divided nation—today as much as ever.

This has been Dan Price for Community Comment.