

Football solemnities: The trouble with pregame prayers

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Perhaps only natives understand the religion that is Texas high school football. Nevertheless, the U.S. Supreme Court is slated to rule on one of its striking rituals: the pregame invocation. In a case argued before the court last month, Mormon and Catholic families in Galveston County contended that the pregame prayers amount to an unconstitutional government endorsement of religion. The school district defended the practice as a legitimate exercise of free speech.

Prayer in school is an old constitutional battleground, and the Galveston school was quite aware of the landmines. In the past the high court has disallowed school-sponsored prayer that is led by a clergyperson and conducted in a setting in which students are expected to participate, such as a graduation ceremony. According to the court, such prayer violates the no-establishment clause of the First Amendment. The school hoped to avoid this judgment by having its pregame prayers led by students (selected by the student body) and by leaving the content of the prayers up to those students. The school also pointed out that attendance at football games is voluntary.

These technical differences do not alter the fact that the prayers are offered at a school-sponsored event run by school officials. Furthermore, as some of the justices noted in their questions, the range of students picked to pray is not likely to constitute a broad spectrum of religious and secular opinion in the community.

The stated aim of the pregame “invocation or message” is “to solemnize the event, to promote good sportsmanship and student safety, and to establish the appropriate environment for the competition.” Justice David Souter said he had some doubts about how a football game could be “solemnized.” He also pointed out that a speech about good sportsmanship is not an “invocation.”

Souter’s comments may reveal that he’s a heretic when it comes to football, but they also suggest an obvious solution: The school should drop the idea of formally

invoking God over the public address system. It should also allow individual students to pray informally (a right already well established in the courts). Finally, the school should put its energy into composing a stirring message that could be delivered before the game—a message simply about sportsmanship, teamwork and the values of the gridiron. Every fan would agree: that's solemn stuff.