

Fact checker: Obama Muslim prayer meme is false

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(RNS) The people behind a popular chain e-mail about President Obama and the National Day of Prayer might want to think about the sin of omission. That's omission, as in omitting facts.

The widely circulated e-mail claims that Obama canceled a National Day of Prayer ceremony at the White House in 2009, but later that year, a National Day of Prayer for Muslims was permitted on Capitol Hill, beside the White House.

The e-mail reads, in part: "This year President Obama canceled the 21st annual National Day of Prayer ceremony at the White House under the ruse of 'not wanting to offend anyone.' BUT ... on September 25, 2009 from 4 AM until 7 PM, a National Day of Prayer FOR THE MUSLIM RELIGION was HELD on Capitol Hill, Beside the White House."

Most of the claims in the e-mail don't have a prayer of being accurate, according to an analysis by PolitiFact New Jersey.

Let's start with the origins of the National Day of Prayer, which is an annual observance for people of all faiths.

President Truman established the day as a national event in 1952. In 1988, President Reagan signed a resolution designating the first Thursday in May as the National Day of Prayer. Every president since -- including Obama -- has issued a proclamation to recognize the day.

Obama, however, has not held a White House ceremony to mark the National Day of Prayer as President George W. Bush did for eight years. President

George H.W. Bush held one, in 1989, and Reagan also held one, in 1982. President Clinton had none. So, there have not been 21 annual National Day of Prayer ceremonies, as the e-mail claims.

In fact-checking this e-mail, a basic Google search finds at least 30 published reports that debunk various claims in it. While those reports confirm Obama decided against the public White House ceremony, none state exactly why.

In a May 7, 2009, CNN video, a representative with the Christian Broadcast Network speculated the cancellation might stem from publicity about controversial comments once made by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Obama's longtime pastor in Chicago. Other articles imply that a statement in Obama's inaugural speech about inclusivity of all religions might have been a factor. At the time, then-White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said of Obama's plans on the National Day of Prayer (his first as president): "Privately, he'll pray as he does every day."

The same is expected this year.

"As he has done each of the last three years, President Obama will continue to recognize the National Day of Prayer," White House spokesman Brandon Lepow said in an e-mail.

Next, let's review the claim about "a National Day of Prayer FOR THE MUSLIM RELIGION" being held "on Capitol Hill, Beside the White House." The Jumma Prayer on Capitol Hill event was a one-time only event that was coordinated by the Dar-ul-Islam mosque in Elizabeth, N.J., to "clear up myths about Muslims," said Imam Ali Jaaber, who attended the Sept. 25, 2009, event.

It was privately organized and never was billed as a National Day Of Prayer. In fact, the two Muslim members of Congress did not attend. Hassen Abdellah, board president at Dar-ul-Islam, organized the event in response to positive remarks by Obama in his inaugural speech and another speech five months later in Egypt about welcoming and acknowledging the presence of Muslims in the United States, Jaaber said.

Also, Capitol Hill is more than a mile from the White House, not beside it. And, "Muslim" is not a religion; a person who follows the religion of Islam is a Muslim.

OUR RULING:

The chain e-mail about Obama and the National Day of Prayer is full of inaccuracies. While it is true Obama did not hold a public ceremony at the White House as President George W. Bush did, it's untrue the ceremony would have been the 21st annual event. The e-mail's author also incorrectly located Capitol Hill as "beside" the White House and identified Muslim as a religion.

Despite the numerous errors in the e-mail, it does contain an element of truth -- and that fits the Truth-O-Meter's definition for Mostly False.