

All together now: The National Day of Prayer Task Force and the National Day of Prayer are not the same thing

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Yesterday, California Rep. Janice Hahn got mad at a James Dobson speech and walked out. Depending what media report you consult, this was “[the National Day of Prayer event](#)” or “[the National Day of Prayer observance](#)” or “[the National Day of Prayer gathering](#)” or even “[the annual non-partisan National Day of Prayer gathering](#).”

Such language isn’t exactly counterfactual, but it is misleading. The event in question isn’t a direct function of the National Day of Prayer itself, which is simply a congressionally designated day of nonsectarian observance, not a specific event. What Hahn walked out of was the annual “national observance” [coordinated by the National Day of Prayer Task Force](#), a conservative evangelical organization.

People conflate the two all the time. [Here’s a helpful introduction to the difference](#), the tone of which betrays some frustration with this confusion. Even Rep. Hahn fails to make the distinction, [accusing Dobson](#) of “hijacking the National Day of Prayer—this nonpartisan, nonpolitical National Day of Prayer.”

Hijacking it? Maybe. But not suddenly, yesterday. For years, via the National Day of Prayer Task Force—which is nonpartisan in the technical, legal sense but not at all nonpolitical.

The task force—run by Shirley Dobson, James’s wife—has long tried to have it both ways here. It explicitly acknowledges its sectarian identity; it also seems to welcome the chance to speak for the National Day of Prayer in what tends to look a lot like an official capacity.

On the one hand, the task force website gives some solid factual history [on its “About” page](#): Congress created the annual observance back in the 50s. The task force is a more recent private org aimed at “encourag[ing] participation,” one that “represents a Judeo Christian expression of the national observance,” not the entirety of the day’s events.

On the other hand: the site's domain is nationaldayofprayer.org. And while its logo includes the words "task force," they're way smaller than the other words. (The words the media seems to think are synonymous with this organization.) Then there's the fact that the major event the task force coordinates each year—not the same thing as the congressionally designated annual observance itself, guys—is dubbed the "national observance."

It's not quite fair to *blame* the task force for the fact that *Roll Call* [refers to it simply as](#) "the National Day of Prayer." But something tells me they don't mind much.

If we all just acknowledged that this is first and foremost an event coordinated by a specific conservative evangelical org, then Rep. Hahn wouldn't have to be *shocked that James Dobson said something aggressively political there*. After all, this is the guy everyone lines up to congratulate other evangelical leaders for not being. This is the guy who pretty much admitted that one of the task force's activities was [to pray against Obama's reelection](#). Sure, maybe Dobson went farther than usual yesterday, but come on. This is what he does; we should expect it by now.

The National Day of Prayer Task Force, of course, has every right to coordinate National Day of Prayer events. I have no interest in going to them (though I happen to love prayer, the nation, and days). I wish politicians didn't feel the need to participate, either. Then they wouldn't need to walk out.

As for the day itself, I wish it would just go away. Steve Benen [gets it half right](#):

For the faithful, every day is a day of prayer, making official government proclamations unnecessary. And for Americans who aren't religious, there's no reason a secular government based on a secular constitution needs to set aside one day a year in which a presidential proclamation says prayer is worthwhile.

Actually, Benen's second sentence applies to *all Americans*, not just the nonreligious. I don't want the government to tell me to pray, and not just because "every day is a day of prayer." Because our bedrock value of religious freedom—you know, the thing Dobson and the rest keep saying they're so upset about—means it's none of the government's business.