

FROM WASHINGTON OFFICE
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First Week

Prayer Amendment Ideas
Aired By Congressmen

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Feelings exploded during the first week of hearings on proposals for a "prayer and Bible reading" amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Members of the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives shouted at each other. Entangling arguments slowed down the hearings.

A strange mixture of politics, religion, American heritage, fear and prejudice paraded across the scene. The true picture of what is behind the movement to change the First Amendment of the Constitution began to emerge as the week wore on.

The first day of the hearings, the large committee room was packed to capacity. A long line of spectators waited outside for admittance. The press tables were crowded with reporters. Television lights glared outside the room for interviews with Congressmen and for other bits of news.

Tempers flared as Congressmen were severely cross-examined by fellow Congressmen - a pleasure usually reserved for witnesses from the general public. Members of the Judiciary Committee squirmed uncomfortably as they were threatened against inaction. "If this committee doesn't do something, the House of Representatives will take the matter out of your hands and do it themselves," was heard from the chairman of the House Rules Committee and others.

What is the cause of such upheaval on Capitol Hill?

Two simple answers can be given, but a peek behind the scenes reveals that there is nothing simple at all about what is going on. First, the United States Supreme Court ruled in 1962 and in 1963 that "official" prayers and "required" devotional exercises of Bible reading and prayers in public schools violate the Constitution of the United States.

Second, a rising demand across the nation for a constitutional amendment to "allow" or "permit" prayer and Bible reading in public schools has forced hearings on 147 resolutions by 111 Congressmen. The issue was forced by Rep. Frank Becker (R., N. Y.) who has succeeded in getting 164 out of a needed 218 signatures of Congressmen to take the matter out of the hands of the Judiciary Committee to be considered directly on the floor of the House of Representatives.

Here in a nutshell is what came out during the first week of hearings.

Much of the drum-beating for a prayer amendment comes from the anti-Supreme Court spirit abroad in the nation. Some Congressmen said that it makes no difference what amendment is approved, just so the wings of the Supreme Court are clipped. They apparently were oblivious to or didn't care about crippling the First Amendment, if they could just get the Supreme Court told off by a constitutional amendment.

Some Congressmen testified that the decisions in the New York Regents' prayer case and in the Bible reading cases were correct. They felt, however, that a constitutional amendment is necessary to head off some future decision that they thought the Court might make.

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Over and over again Congressmen insisted that they wanted a return to conditions as they existed before the Supreme Court ruled out "official" prayers and "required" devotions. They said that everything was quiet and peaceable then, and that no problems existed. They quickly were challenged, however, with the question, "How did these cases ever get to the Supreme Court, if all was peaceable?"

They were also reminded that prior to the 1962 and 1963 decisions more than 20 States were having difficulty over similar problems.

Some Congressmen frankly stated that they were in favor of some form of State sponsored religion. They charged that atheism is getting so strong that government needs to do something to stop it. They said that so many children never are exposed to the "God idea" at home or in the churches that government needs to do something about it. They wanted to be sure that America is on God's side in the battle against Communism. In order to do this the Constitution needs to make it clear that this is a godly nation, they claimed.

The Congressmen say that they are convinced that the majority of the American people want some sort of a prayer amendment. Their mail has been so overwhelmingly in favor of some change that they are making sure that everybody knows that they are "for" God, prayer and the Bible.

Several Congressmen became so emotional that they made it appear that all who agree with the Supreme Court, who oppose prayer amendments, and who favor the First Amendment as it now is, are either wittingly or unwittingly aiding the cause of atheism and communism. Patriotism and religion were made to appear the same by some.

So hard were these charges that some members of the Judiciary Committee interrupted the testimony to plead for cool headedness and for intelligent consideration of a serious constitutional problem. They pled with their fellow Congressmen not to charge that those who defend religious liberty are atheists or that they are playing into the hands of secularists.

Here are some of the questions raised by those who are trying to get Congress off its emotional binge. If a prayer amendment is approved will it not have the effect of repealing the First Amendment? In the event of approval of such an amendment what branch of the government will have the right to regulate religious exercises in schools--the federal government, state government, or local school boards? Whose Bible shall be used - Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, Moslem, or whose? Whose prayers and what prayer customs shall be adopted?

How can voluntariness be achieved in school religious practices if children are under compulsion to ask for dismissal if the practice violates their conscience? What will be the effect on school board elections if prayers become a political issue in communities that are divided among two or more religious groups? Would a prayer amendment in the Federal constitution have the effect of repealing those laws in many states that prohibit state sponsored religious exercises?

One Congressman freely admitted that adoption of a prayer amendment would be a "chipping away" of the First Amendment and that it would open doors to further State aid and tax aid to religion. He said that the First Amendment did not say what it meant.

Three Congressmen opposed prayer amendments. They said the Supreme Court was right in its decisions. They took their stand for the First Amendment as adequate to protect the religious freedom of all Americans.

More Congressmen are yet to be heard. Then will come the general public and religious spokesmen. A different story will shape up as the hearings proceed.

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President Proclaims
Constitution Week

(4-27-64)

WASHINGTON (BP)-- President Lyndon B. Johnson, in a presidential proclamation, called for a national observance of Citizenship Day and Constitution Week in 1964.

September 17 is designated as Citizenship Day, and September 17-23 as Constitution Week.

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Our constitutional form of government "has stood the test of time," the President said, and still stands "ever resolute in its quest for peace, liberty, justice, and economic opportunity for all mankind."

Because of the challenges endangering the rights of men, the President said, it is "imperative" that the citizens be aware of the events leading to the adoption of the Constitution and "of the adversities that have subsequently proved its durability."

In observing Citizenship Day, President Johnson urged "federal, state, and local officials, as well as all religious, civic, educational, and other organizations, to hold appropriate ceremonies...to inspire all our citizens to pledge themselves anew to the service of their country and to the support and defense of the Constitution."

He urged that the people observe Constitution Week in schools, churches, and other places "that our citizens may have a better understanding of the Constitution and of the rights and responsibilities of United States citizenship."

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Proclaims Day Of
Prayer For Peace

(4-27-64)

WASHINGTON (BP)-- "A day of prayer for permanent peace" is set for Memorial Day, May 30, 1964, in a proclamation issued by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

The President expressed appreciation for the "supreme and selfless sacrifice" of those who have died in the cause of freedom. He said the same "revolutionary beliefs and ideals" for which they died are still at issue today.

Memorial Day "provides a fitting occasion," the President continued, to "commemorate departed loved ones and offer prayers for the preservation of liberty and peace free from the threat of war."

In setting the day for prayer President Johnson said, "I call upon all the people of the nation to invoke God's blessing on those who have died in defense of our country and to pray for a world of law and order." He set 11:00 as the hour to unite in such prayer, and urged press, radio and television cooperation in the observance.

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