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FROM WASHINGTON OFFICE
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June 1, 1964

Baptists Protest
Prayer Amendments

WASHINGTON (BP)-- C. Emanuel Carlson presented Baptist support for religious liberty as guaranteed by the First Amendment of the Constitution before the House Judiciary Committee in hearings here. He is executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

Rep. Emanuel Celler (D., N. Y.), chairman of the Committee, conducted the month-long hearings on nearly 160 proposals to alter the First Amendment in order to provide for religious exercises in public schools.

Before the hearings began on May 6 a flood of mail to Congressmen demanded a Constitutional amendment in order to reverse the decision of the United States Supreme Court relating to religion in public schools.

(In 1962 the Supreme Court banned "official" prayers in New York's schools. In 1963 in cases from Maryland and Pennsylvania the Court said that required devotionals in schools violate the Constitution.)

As the hearings progressed the issues became clear that the proposals to change the Constitution would establish some form of religion in the United States. In addition there was a rising protest on the part of the nation's religious leaders that they wanted the guarantees for religious liberty to remain unchanged as now stated in the Bill of Rights.

During the course of the hearings a noticeable reversal in the expression of national opinion took place. It was reported that the mail received by the Judiciary Committee shifted to 20 to 1 against any change in the Constitution.

On several occasions during the hearings the position of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs was attacked. The Committee favored the Supreme Court decisions and opposed the so-called "Becker amendment" which would allow government sponsored religious exercises in schools. Those who attacked said that the Baptist leaders in Washington were "generals without an army" and that they did not represent Baptist viewpoints across the nation.

In his testimony Carlson presented resolutions from both the Southern and American Baptist Conventions which were passed overwhelmingly at the recent conventions in Atlantic City. Both Conventions stood by the position of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and asked Congress for no alteration in the Nation's basic document guaranteeing religious liberty.

Carlson's presentation included five appendices illustrating Baptist opposition to any change in the Constitution. They cited resolutions by Baptist groups, statements by Baptist leaders throughout the nation, editorials in Baptist publications, and a study document to be used by the Religious Liberty Conference next October. It took 60 pages to present this evidence.

He told the Congressmen that the Baptist "movement has carried a protest against the use of the powers of government for the imposition of religious ideas or religious practices."

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"If the Supreme Court decisions of 1962 and 1963 had curtailed the free exercise of religion by the people," Carlson continued, "our churches would have protested this as a violation of the Constitution. However, since the decisions dealt with the role of government powers the Baptist channels that dealt with the issues saw them as contributing to the progress of a great principle."

The Baptist spokesman declared that "among us prayer is not a matter of social adjustment or of national heritage.... On the contrary, attempts by public authorities to claim some permissive or regulatory power over prayer or worship is an immediate cause of apprehension among us."

Carlson hit hard at the emotional outburst against the Supreme Court decisions, but he looked upon the entire episode "as making an important contribution to the future of freedom in America and the world."

Referring to the proposals to amend the First Amendment he said, "someone needed to get excited and to throw out some superficial proposals in order for more penetrating thought processes to be engendered."

The Baptist leader answered the charge that those who oppose a "prayer amendment" to the Constitution aid the quase of Communism. He said that "a central evil of communism is that governments arrogate to themselves a competence to tell people what to believe and not to believe. Our answer to official atheism is official freedom of religion, not officially prescribed prayers or devotions."

Others have protested that the minorities in the United States are depriving the majorities of their rights. Carlson said that "the members of a majority group have the same rights as the members of a minority group and that none of them have the right to use the sovereign powers of government to advance their religious ideas or practices."

He predicted that in the months and years ahead Baptists will understand more fully the issues of religious liberty in the modern world. Once these principles become clear the Baptists can be counted on to stand for freedom for all men, he concluded.

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(Exclusive story to Baptist Beacon of Arizona)

Congressmen Take Sides
In School Prayer Issue

WASHINGTON (BP)—Arizona's three Congressmen have divided two to one on some form of government-sponsored religion in the public schools.

Rep. George F. Senner, Jr. (D) of the third district and Rep. Morris K. Udall (D) of the second district have defended the First Amendment and its guarantees of religious freedom as interpreted by the Supreme Court.

Rep. John J. Rhodes (R) of the first district is in favor of a Constituti nal amendment to allow what the Supreme Court prohibited in its 1962 and 1963 school prayer and Bible reading decisions.

In a letter Rhodes authorized a statement for use in a news story for the Baptist Beacon on the position of Arizona Congressmen on the current school religion controversy.

Rhodes said, "I am in favor of a Constitutional amendment to return this country to the position it was in prior to the Supreme Court decision on the New York school prayer."

He continued, "I understand that the hearings in the Judiciary Committee are proceeding as planned, and that some final action will be taken before too many more days have elapsed."

(The Supreme Court prohibited "official" prayers in the case of New York and required devotions in the cases of Maryland and Pennsylvania.)

The House Judiciary Committee has completed more than four weeks of hearings on nearly 160 proposals to amend the Constitution to permit some form of public school religious exercises. Prior to the hearings the mail to Congressmen was overwhelmingly in favor of such an amendment.

However, in recent weeks the mail to the Judiciary Committee shifted to more than 20 to 1 against any tampering with the First Amendment and for the preservation of the "free exercise of religion" as guaranteed by the Constitution. The shift was caused largely by the efforts of religious groups who alerted their constituents to the impending threat to religious freedom by changes in the Constitution.

In newsletters to their constituents both Senner and Udall vigorously defended the First Amendment's protection of the religious liberty of Americans and opposed any changes in the Bill of Rights which protects the people against the powers of government.

Writing against the so-called "Becker amendment" which would reverse the Supreme Court's decisions and would in effect alter the First Amendment, Senner said, "to authorize 'boards' - or some 'Bureau of Religious Affairs' - to set patterns for religious exercises is to prefer and establish one religion over another."

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In a similar vein Udall said that "passag of the Becker Amendment might invalidate existing Arizona laws and introduce a new element of inter-faith friction in our communiti s."

Senner's statement outlined "how the Reds took over the church" in Chin . He pointed out that the new Chinese Constitution guarantees "freedom of religious belief to all Chinese citizens." He then described how these churches lost their freedom.

First, he said, the Chinese Reds made patriotism and loyalty to the church mean the same thing. The slogan adopted was: "Love Country; Love Church."

Next, he continued, they undermined and discredited the leadership of the churches. Church leaders were made to appear "subversive," and puppet leaders were substituted in their places.

Finally, the Red China government regimented education and remoulded the religious thinking of the people, according to Senner. The result, he said was a "non-denominational" practice of Christianity which "replaced vital and spontaneous professions of faith."

He then said that those pushing for an amendment to the American Bill of Rights (never before amended) "agree that the form of permitted religious exercises in tax-supported schools should be set by local government 'boards'."

Setting the record straight Senner said "the Supreme Court has denied the right of a school board (the New York Regents) to usurp the sacred right of parents to choose the religious training that shall be enforced upon their children, and substitute therefor a pale 'non-denominational' exercise of government-controlled 'prayer.'"

Udall reminded his constituents that even prior to the Supreme Court's decisions 25 of the states, either by their Constitutions or by statutes, prohibited religious exercises in public schools.

The Arizona Constitution, he pointed out, provided from the beginning of statehood for separation of church and state. The present law in Arizona provides, "A teacher who uses...denominational books or teaches any sectarian doctrine or conducts any religious exercises in school is guilty of unprofessional conduct and his certificate shall be revoked."

"But passage of the Becker Amendment might invalidate existing Arizona laws," Udall continued.

"It is strange," he wrote, "that many of the people writing in behalf of Mr. Becker's amendment have written on other occasions to denounce government interf rence with people's private affairs and individual freedoms. Yet they seem to believe that home and church can no longer be depended on, and that government must save religion by compulsory instruction."

Among the issues to be considered before a change in the First Amendment is attempted Udall pointed out this one: "If you're a Protestant, how would you f el if your child recited the 'Hail Mary' in school? If you're a Catholic, how would you like your child reciting the prayers of Martin Luther? What happens in predominantly Mormon communities of Arizona if the school board prescribes readings from the Book of Mormon?"

He concluded, "I intend to listen to all arguments, pro and con, but I am inclined t agree with the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs when it said: 'Whatever it is, religion on a government platter has never provided much spiritual nurture for the people nor has it given strength to the nation.'"

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