

Remarks at a Candle-Lighting Ceremony for Prayer in Schools

September 25, 1982

We want to welcome each of you to the White House. We gather together to draw attention to an issue that is as vital to the future of this country as any that we face. No one should doubt that economic and technological progress will have very little impact unless the spirit of our people remains strong.

Calvin Coolidge, a President whom I greatly admire, once said, "The government of a country never gets ahead of the religion of a country." Fostering the faith and character of our people is one of the great trusts of responsible leadership. I deeply believe that if those in government offer a good example, and if the people preserve the freedom which is their birthright as Americans, no one need fear the future.

Unfortunately, in the last two decades we've experienced an onslaught of such twisted logic that if Alice were visiting America, she might think she'd never left Wonderland. [Laughter] We're told that it somehow violates the rights of others to permit students in school who desire to pray to do so. Clearly this infringes on the freedom of those who choose to pray -- a freedom taken for granted since the time of our Founding Fathers.

This would be bad enough, but the purge of God from our schools went much farther. In one case, a Federal court ruled against the right of children to voluntarily say grace before lunch in the school cafeteria. In another situation a group of children, again on their own initiative and with their parents' approval, wanted to begin the school day with a minute of prayer and meditation, and they, too, were prohibited from doing so. Students have even been prevented from having voluntary prayer groups on school property after class hours just on their own.

Now, no one is suggesting that others should be forced into any religious activity, but to prevent those who believe in God from expressing their faith is an outrage. And the relentless drive to eliminate God from our schools can and should be stopped.

This issue has brought people of good will and every faith together to make the situation right. We believe that permitting voluntary prayer in public schools is within the finest traditions of this country and consistent with the principles of American liberty. Neither the constitutional amendment that I've endorsed nor the legislative remedies offered by others permits anyone to be coerced into religious activity. Instead, these measures are designed to protect the rights of those who choose to pray as well as those who choose not to.

I want to thank all of you and all of those who'll gather on the Capitol Mall this evening for what you're doing on this vital issue. And a special thanks to Senator Helms and Senator Thurmond and Congressman Kindness for all that they have done.

And today I'd like to take this opportunity to urge the Senate to move directly on the constitutional amendment now awaiting action. But Senate action is not enough. The leadership in the House has the proposed constitutional amendment bottled up and has, thus far, failed to hold the appropriate hearings. Some suggest we should keep religion out of politics. Well, the opposite is also true. Those in politics should keep their hands off of the religious freedom of our people, and especially our children.

Earlier I quoted Calvin Coolidge. He had some other words I'd like to share with you. "It would be difficult for me to conceive," President Coolidge said, "of anyone being able to administer the duties of a great office like the Presidency without a belief in the guidance of Divine Providence. Unless the President is sustained by an abiding faith in the divine power, I cannot understand how he would have the courage to attempt to meet the various problems that constantly pour in upon him from all parts of the earth."

Well, after 20 months I can attest to the truth of those words. Faith in God is a vital guidepost, a source of inspiration, and a pillar of strength in times of trial. In recognition of this, the Congress and the Supreme Court begin each day with a prayer, and that's why we provide chaplains for the Armed Forces. We can and must respect the rights of those who are nonbelievers, but we must not cut ourselves off from this indispensable source of strength and guidance.

I think it'd be a tragedy for us to deny our children what the rest of us, in and out of government, find so valuable. If the President of the United States can pray with others in the Oval Office -- and I have on a number of occasions -- then let's make certain that our children have the same right as they go about preparing for their futures and for the future of this country.

And now I understand that we're to light some candles. I think you children are to go down there and someone is to present me with a -- there it is. These -- [inaudible] -- candles, as I understand it, will start the ceremony tonight on the Mall.

Happy that we've had this opportunity this morning. God bless you all.

Note: The President spoke at 12:30 p.m. in the State Dining Room at the White House.