

THE SUPREME COURT DECISION ON PUBLIC PRAYER

A Special Statement by Rep. Morris K. Udall

Americans are a religious people. Our nation's greatness is due in no small part to the strong religious background of our founding Fathers. Thus, I appreciate the interest shown in the Supreme Court decision on officially-prescribed state prayers.

The essential separation of Church and State is surely not affected by prayers at public events, in the halls of Congress, or by reference to God in our national anthem, the Declaration of Independence or the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag. I would strongly oppose any abridgement of these traditional practices.

I can certainly appreciate the concern this decision caused many citizens who value our religious heritage. When I first heard of it, I was inclined to be critical myself. However, I have read the decision, and I would say that there has been widespread misunderstanding of just what the Court did say in this case. The Court said the government cannot prescribe official state prayers. That is all it said.

The prayer prescribed in this instance certainly was general and innocuous. It does not offend me. Surely, it would seem, this simple prayer should be allowed to stand. However, our religious teachers point out that principles cannot be ignored: for example, a trivial, innocuous sin is, nevertheless, a sin. In order to examine this principle, let us take, not another innocuous prayer, but a clearly controversial prayer that could be prescribed by the state. If the government has power to prescribe prayers most of us approve, it has power to prescribe prayers some of us would disapprove. Suppose the State of New York had decreed that every school day should start with the following prayer:

"Oh Lord, we pray that you will strengthen the hand of our governor in order that he might one day be President of this great land and guide us according to the principles of the Baptist faith."

Naturally, we would all be shocked. Furthermore, I believe most people would immediately question the right of the state, not merely to prescribe political prayers, but to prescribe any prayers at all. Under these circumstances, surely many would say, "No politician has a right to tell my children what to pray."

We should remember that New York required every teacher to start every class day by leading every child (unless he wanted to look "odd" by refusing) in a recitation of certain exact words. This time the words were such as would be objectionable to only a small minority. But what about future prayers? What about the principle of governors and presidents and mayors dictating people's prayers? Wouldn't this prayer-dictating function raise anew the fears of

Protestants over the actions of Catholic office-holders, and vice versa? I think it might. As a strong believer in the separation of Church and State, I consider this tradition extremely important to our kind of society. I am confident the recent Supreme Court decision will not have the effects many citizens fear, but that it will protect us, in the future, from greater evils than we presently imagine.

The New York case began with a complaint of 10 parents who believed the state should not prescribe prayers for their children to recite. If the majority of Americans feel there should be an amendment to allow states to direct the saying of prayers in schools, our Constitution provides the process to effect this change. Because of the safeguards of our system I am certain any decision, for or against a change, will be a considered decision, with all of the implications spelled out and understood through full public debate. This is the way our Constitution protects us from hasty or ill-considered judgments.