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## GOD BLESS AMERICA

There is a time for everything, even prayer in school

Sometimes pendulums swing too far—at least metaphorically speaking. That's the case with prayer in public schools. The horrific terrorist attacks on our nation evoked a range of emotions, and it's hard to find anyone who would deny the value or appropriateness of a spiritual response ranking high on the list. When President Bush proclaimed Friday, Sept. 14 a National Day of Prayer and Remembrance, no one condemned that he called on the nation to pray for the victims of the attack and to ask for God's help in seeking justice. The president didn't get cited for violating the principle of separation of church and state, but some students are wondering why it is suddenly OK to pray, even in school.

Virtually every school in America was in session on our National Day of Prayer and Remembrance. Many let students view a broadcast of the service, and most

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followed the lead of Secretary of Education Rod Paige, who requested that

school district leaders "consider having a moment of silence to be observed in classrooms or in a larger assembly of students."

When I asked my son what he did during his middle school's moment of silence, he told me he "just sat there." I asked him if he prayed and he said, "No, I didn't think we were allowed to pray in school." At first his response startled me, but then I realized it made perfect sense. The pendulum of prayer in school had swung too far.

For the last 35 years we've slowly, but steadily, removed references to God from our schools, and pushed prayer from the public view. In many cases this was motivated by a valid commitment to pluralism, aiming to prevent any appearance that our schools were endorsing a particular faith, or any faith at all.

Yet, for a few, the goal has been to completely eradicate religious expression from school settings. They view the separation of church and state as a license to outlaw religious expression of any kind. And over time things have gone too far.

Not enough of us questioned the sensibility of punishing students who bowed their heads at the

lunch table. Somehow we bought into the idea that these alleged silent prayers were inappropriate; that somehow non-praying students would conclude that by allowing even one student to pray silently, the school was implicitly endorsing that student's religion. Out went T-shirts with scripture references and out went Christmas carols. Even jewelry with religious symbols was questioned. By the start of this new century, religious expression had effectively been expelled from school.

### ONE NATION UNDER

So we shouldn't be surprised if our need and desire to express ourselves spiritually now confuse our students. How are they to understand the president's statement, "In time, we will find healing and recovery; and, in the face of all this evil, we remain strong and united, 'one nation under God.'" Recent valedictorians have had their speeches censored to remove such references, yet now it's a safe bet that no one will protest if God's blessing is invoked at school functions.

Despite the tragic and disastrous loss we suffered in these evil attacks, we know that good can come from it too. We've witnessed countless examples of grace and goodness. We've seen the heroism embodied in the superhuman efforts of emergency crews and rescue workers. And we've experienced unimagined compassion and generosity. Amidst all of this it's also good to see the pendulum swing back a bit toward center with regard to personal prayer and other religious expressions in school.

We now have an opportunity to teach our students the appropriate balance between the freedom of religious expression and the separation of church and state. And it's precisely this balance that makes our nation so strong. The tragedy of terrorism shows us to be a spiritual people, but we are not an indoctrinated people upon whom a fixed set of religious practices is imposed. Our enemies hate our freedom and diversity, but that is what we must celebrate and it is what we must teach to our children. They should never be afraid to say 'God bless America' and 'God bless our schools.' **D**

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