



National Prayer Bazaar

by Jonathan Aitken

AMERICA'S NATIONAL PRAYER BREAKFAST has a problem. It is in danger of becoming an empty social ritual rather than a meaningful spiritual event.

As a reasonably regular attendee at the NPB for several years, your High Spirits columnist is sad about the decline in its standards and sorry to be firing these warning shots of criticism across its bows. But before this historic gathering drifts further toward being just another secular convention with a dash of prayer added, its mission needs to be reexamined and its course re-chartered.

The origins of the NPB go back to the Great Depression, when 19 leading businessmen in Seattle met to pray over breakfast for the poor and unemployed of their community. The idea, inspired by the meal cooked by Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias as described in John 21, spread to other cities. In 1942 breakfast prayer groups were founded in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. Eleven years later President Eisenhower asked the senators if he could join them. That was the birth of what is now called the National Prayer Breakfast.

The great generation of the Eisenhower era were God-fearing people, rooted in faith, raised in hard times, and tested in war. Those traditions died slowly, but even so no president since 1953 has dared to miss the NPB, although some must have longed to strike it from their calendars. Bill Clinton looked a most bedraggled lion thrown to the Christians when he had to attend at the height of the lurid allegations about his most un-Churchillian use of cigars with Monica Lewinsky. Another unrepentant White House sinner was Richard Nixon during Watergate. He declared that he would prefer to spend a couple of

hours in the dentist's chair without an anaesthetic rather than to go and pray in public at this event—but in the end he went. February 5, 2009, saw the 57th NPB, and President Obama was dutifully on parade. But he too looked and sounded as though he would rather have been somewhere else.

The NPB's modern weakness lies in its success. It has become the worldliest of events, a see-and-be-seen extravaganza with a Cecil B. DeMille-sized cast of 4,000 extras featuring major donors and minor diplomats. The latter now far outnumber members of Congress. This seemed to be a matter of pride for the organizers, who kept referring to this great *international* breakfast.

Too much internationalization can bring its problems, for there were moments when the proceedings seemed to have turned into a diplomatic networking exercise for B-list embassies. The NPB co-chairman, Rep. Vernon Ehlers of Michigan, had such difficulty making himself heard above the hubbub that he needed the apocryphal advice once given by a cathedral verger to a preacher: "You'll have to speak up, sir, in this church the agnostics are something dreadful." When Rep. Ehlers eventually became audible he complained, "Obviously some people here are not aware of our spiritual traditions." By this he meant that about a quarter of the breakfasters at this feeding of the four thousand began tucking into their croissants without waiting for a blessing. Other little breaches of protocol included an African ambassador who took multiple calls on his cell phone during the Scripture readings, a politician from Laos who fell asleep while the opening hymn was being sung, and a table full of Central

Asian businessmen who noisily swapped visiting cards with Washington lobbyists as their neighbors attempted to pray.

President Obama clearly missed these equivalents of the moneychangers in the temple because in the opening lines of his remarks he solemnly intoned: "And today, as I see presidents and dignitaries here from every corner of the globe, it strikes me that this is one of the rare occasions that still brings much of the world together in a moment of peace and goodwill." Since the highest ranking of these great global statesmen attending the NPB turned out to be the prime minister of Albania, the president of Haiti, and the secretary of state of Kazakhstan, one began to wonder if the expectations were running too far ahead of the realities.

President Obama had his expectation problems too. Some of them were perhaps due to the event coming so soon after his election. He can't always reproduce the soaring oratory of his acceptance night speech in Chicago, particularly to an audience where foreigners and Republicans were in the majority. But at least he brought attention back to where the original prayer breakfasts were focused—"on the afflicted and those who have fallen on hard times," even if his announced solution to these problems, "a new White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships" seemed rather underwhelming.

Obama's unexpected difficulty was that he had to speak immediately after Tony Blair. The contrast between them was reminiscent of Tacitus's comparison between the two greatest orators of the ancient world: "When Cicero sat down his hearers said, 'How well he spoke!' But when Demosthenes finished they rose up, crying, 'Let us march!'"

As the keynote speaker, Tony Blair was the day's Demosthenes, on fire with passion. As this column has previously noted (June 2008), the former British prime minister has become a powerful advocate opposing the growth of aggressive secularism. "I say that there are limits to humanism and beyond those limits God and only God can work," he told the NPB, urging his listeners to return to the fear of God because the phrase "really means obedience to God, humility before God, acceptance through God that there is something bigger, better, and more important than you. It is that humbling of man's vanity, that stirring of conscience through God's prompting, that recognition of our limitations that faith alone can bestow."

This was a fine speech by Blair, combining self-deprecating humor, personal testimony, and sound theology. More importantly, he touched a deeper wavelength of spirituality than seemed to be present in most of the outer atmospherics of the 2009 NPB. The Fellowship, a group inspired by Doug Coe that



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runs the event today, needs to get back to the 1953 basics of prayers for the nation, for victims of the recession, and for the God-fearing leaders of Congress. Irrelevant diplomats, multi-faith political correctness, international glitz, and networking businessmen are not the right components for America's National Prayer Breakfast in the 21st century. ❁

Jonathan Aitken, *The American Spectator's High Spirits columnist*, is most recently author of *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Crossway Books). His biographies include *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed* (Doubleday) and *Nixon: A Life, now available in a new paperback edition* (Regnery).