

# Is prayer now illegal on the steps of the U.S. Supreme Court?

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High school students touring Washington, D.C.'s Lincoln Memorial this summer were told to quit singing *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

Police from the National Park Service say they were worried that someone might be offended by America's national anthem being sung by Americans visiting America's capital.

U.S. Park Police cited a policy that requires any singing at the Lincoln Memorial to be "content neutral."

Patriotism isn't neutral.

*The Star-Spangled Banner* is blatantly pro-American. And the park service cannot allow something that could offend tourists who hate this country.

The spontaneous concert was done by a group of high school students attending a conservative leadership conference in Washington, D.C., sponsored by Young America's Foundation.

Police interrupted the students – who then defied the order and continued singing louder.

"They told them to stop singing," said Evan Gassman, an adult chaperone for the group. "I was taken aback. You wouldn't expect a display of national patriotism to be censored. They really did not provide the students a reason."

The decision to sing the national anthem at the memorial was a spur of the moment event, according to high school senior Shawn Balcomb, of Richmond Hill, Georgia. "We got maybe two lines in and a police officer came over and he was yelling. He quieted us down."

Balcomb, 17, said the officer told the group they were being too loud. "I was dumbfounded," he said. I didn't realize there was something wrong with singing the national anthem."

Balcomb said they didn't intend on creating a ruckus – just wanted to show their patriotism.

"So much for freedom of speech," commented Alveda King in a guest column for the *Wall Street Journal*. Her uncle, the late Martin Luther King Jr. once made his "I Have a Dream" speech from the same spot at the memorial.

She had a similar run-in with over-zealous park police, she says, however it was at her uncle's memorial in Atlanta.

## Misplaced authority

There a park policeman, she says, "removed a bullhorn from the hands of Father Frank Pavone, an internationally recognized leader of the pro-life movement. We were a group more than 100 strong, in Atlanta to declare that abortion is the greatest violation of civil rights in our day. We brought a wreath to lay at Uncle Martin's grave while we prayed, but we weren't allowed.

"The National Park Service said that would constitute a demonstration. So much for freedom of assembly."

So, the National Park Service has decided that there can be no demonstration at King's memorial ... even though King made his name leading demonstrations. That's ridiculous, says his niece, who is a conservative politically.

"Americans are hungry to reclaim the symbols of our liberty, hard won by an unlikely group of outnumbered, out-gunned, under-funded patriots determined not to live in servitude to the British Empire," she wrote in the *Journal*. "If we want to sing the national anthem at a memorial to Lincoln, the man who led this nation out of slavery, and made my people free, we should be able to send our voices soaring to the heavens."

No, says the U.S. Park Police. An official has confirmed that the students at the Lincoln Memorial were in violation of federal law. Their impromptu performance constituted a demonstration in an area that must remain "completely content neutral."

"The area they were standing in and singing is an area that is restricted for this type of activity," said Sgt. David Schlosser, who explained that performances, regardless of content, are banned to "maintain a contemplative and reverent area for the Lincoln Memorial, for the other guests and visitors."

Instead of doing as they were instructed, Gassman said the students resumed the song – an impromptu form of civil disobedience.

They sang louder – and were joined by other tourists.

"If their idea of civil disobedience is singing the national anthem, then so be it," Gassman said. "Let them disobey."

A video is now circulating the Internet showing the students loudly singing the anthem despite the police officer's objections.

"That's the most offensive thing out of all this," Gassman said.

"We just wanted to pay respect to our nation – in our capital," said Balcomb.

Schlosser, said the students were not cited and to his knowledge no report was filed.

"We need to make certain that all other visitors that don't want to be a part of that or just choose to be tourists are able to do so in the same light that probably President Lincoln wanted – which is completely content neutral," he said.

Young America's Foundation holds periodic conferences at the nation's capital, inspired by the late William F. Buckley's call for "major events for conservative students throughout the country."

The 32nd annual National Conservative Student Conference in Washington, D.C. drew more than 450 high schoolers from 38 states, as well as young Americans living in the United Kingdom, France and Canada.

Students heard remarks from Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers about her fight against the leftwing agenda in the House of Representatives.

"We can start anew and make America a greater leader in this century as it was in the last century," she said.

Other speakers included Christian comedian Rich Lowry, conservative activist Bay Buchanan, retired Washington Redskins Coach George Allen, former Senator Fred Thompson, columnist David Horowitz, Senator Jeff Sessions, Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, Senator Jon Kyl, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and other conservative leaders.

## The need for Americans to take action

Thompson spoke to the youngsters about the need to change the culture of Washington and the need for Americans to take action. He even talked about his return to acting, joking that “after spending eight years in Washington, I missed the sincerity and realism of Hollywood.”

Gingrich talked with the students about the Declaration of Independence.

He noted, “It’s a right to pursue happiness, which doesn’t mean a right to be happy, doesn’t say you are entitled to sue if you are unhappy, doesn’t suggest we need a federal department of happiness, it doesn’t propose that we need happiness stamps for the under happy, and it doesn’t suggest that politicians should take from the too happy to give to the unhappy so that we can have a redistribution of happiness.”

Many of the speakers discussed the theme of defending freedom from the left’s constant urge for larger government. “Everything government does to increase its power comes at direct expense of your freedom,” warned Virginia Attorney General Ken Cuccinelli whose speech aired on C-SPAN nationwide.

Young America’s Foundation was founded in 1969, with a focus on sharing conservative ideas with students through conferences, campus lectures, seminars, posters, and activism initiatives.