

How to save the Trump ballroom

The president should invoke the Religious Freedom Restoration Act

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In 1800, the speaker of the House of Representatives informed members that the House chaplains would hold church services in the House chamber every Sunday.

Thomas Jefferson, while serving as president, attended services there, as referenced in an 1802 letter.

The House hasn't hosted religious services in years, but the proposed new White House ballroom could become home to regular religious worship services, and in so doing, save the construction project itself.

In the ongoing legal dispute between the National Trust for Historic Preservation and President Trump, the trust is demanding a halt to construction of the ballroom. This, despite its complete lack of legal standing to sue the president, the obvious

separation-of-powers issue and the weight of historic practice of past presidents making significant modifications. (These include the construction of the White House itself, supervised by President Washington's handselected architect.)

In an effort to stop Mr. Trump from providing an essential ballroom free to taxpayers, the trust cites various federal laws, including the congressional ban on the construction of a new building on federal property without congressional approval (this is not new construction, but a modification), and an alleged requirement for historic preservation review.

However, something missing from the legal dispute could weigh heavily in Mr. Trump's favor: faith.

Mr. Trump should consider authorizing a church to meet weekly in the new ballroom for prayer and worship to serve the religious needs of his family, White House staff and other leaders who would like to worship in peace.

In today's climate of political violence fomented by the left, our leaders should have a place to worship peacefully, without threats that may inadvertently harm innocent bystanders. This would have a significant impact on the legal proceedings, as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act would apply.

This special law, enacted by Congress, protects the religious freedom of all Americans. It states that if any law or rule of the federal government substantially burdens the religious exercise of a person — and the president and his family, along with his staff, surely qualify as people — then the only way that law or

rule may interfere with that religious exercise is for it to advance such a compelling reason that the government must have the rule and provide no other exceptions.

Rules about historic preservation and aesthetics, even if they apply to the White House (and they don't), must give way to the religious needs of the president, his family and his staff.

Some may argue that the president, his family and his staff, who work seven days a week, could go somewhere else for religious services or worship at some other time. Yet the U.S. Supreme Court has made clear that a constitutional right may not be abridged on the naked plea that it may be exercised elsewhere.

Democrats in the 1980s attacked President Reagan for not regularly attending church. Reagan chose not to go to church, even though he wanted to do so to the core of his being, because he feared that his presence posed too great a threat to fellow parishioners.

Reagan readily gave up his religious freedom to secure it for others. His restraint was understandable, especially in the wake of being shot in front of the Washington Hilton — yes, the same hotel where Mr. Trump faced the threat of yet another assassin.

If Reagan had a proper place of worship in the White House itself, he surely would have been eternally grateful.

I cannot speak to whether Reagan would approve of Mr. Trump's specific plans, but I think we can all agree that the president, the first family and his seven-day-a-week staff deserve a place of corporate religious worship that does not necessitate the hoisting of enormous security burdens on their fellow parishioners.

Mr. Trump should invoke the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and designate the ballroom as a place for regular religious worship for his family, his staff and other White House guests. It is fitting with tradition and essential for spiritual guidance and support, and it resolves Reagan's dilemma of balancing his faith with the needs of his friends in the faith.

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