News



People worship to Christian music at Rededicate 250, a mostly conservative Christian prayer gathering in honor of the United States' 250th anniversary, on the National Mall, Sunday, May 17, 2026, in Washington. (AP/Julia Demaree Nikhinson)

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Washington — May 17, 2026

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Thousands of people streamed onto the National Mall for a daylong prayer rally Sunday billed as a "rededication of our country as One Nation under God."

Against the backdrop of the Washington Monument, worship music blared from a stage that made clear the event's Christian focus. Arched stained-glass windows, set underneath grand columns resembling a federal building, depicted the nation's founders alongside a white cross.

Several speakers celebrated Christianity's ties to American history, a blending of ideas that critics flagged ahead of the prayer gathering as supporting Christian nationalism.

From the stage, the Rev. Robert Jeffress embraced the term, which is often taken as a pejorative. "If being a Christian nationalist means loving Jesus Christ and loving America, count me in," said the prominent Southern Baptist pastor.

President Donald Trump was expected to address the gathering in a video message. Other top Republicans, including Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., were also on the schedule as part of the celebrations this year marking 250 years of U.S. independence.

Only one name on the Rededicate 250 program was not Christian. Most were among Trump's longtime evangelical supporters, including Paula White-Cain of the White House Faith Office and evangelist Franklin Graham of Samaritan's Purse.

"We are deeply concerned that what is really being rededicated is a nation to a very narrow and ideological part of the Christian faith that betrays our nation's fundamental commitment to religious freedom," said the Rev. Adam Russell Taylor, a Baptist minister who leads the progressive Christian organization Sojourners.

The conservative Christian lineup featured guests who often argue that the United States was founded as a Christian nation, a narrative disputed by many historians and other religious traditions.

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Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, noted the religious diversity of early America, including Jews, Muslims and Indigenous people. "I want to shine a light on America's history as a nation that welcomes, celebrates, and protects people of all faiths and those of no faith," Pesner said.

Hegseth, who has infused Christian language and worship with his role leading the Pentagon, asked the gathering in a video to pray to "our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Referencing George Washington's faith, he said, "Let us pray without ceasing. Let us pray for our nation on bended knee."

Orthodox Jewish Rabbi Meir Soloveichik was the only non-Christian religious leader listed on the program. He serves on the Trump administration's Religious Liberty Commission along with White-Cain, Graham and Cardinal Timothy Dolan and Bishop Robert Barron, Catholic clerics also featured on the program.

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The event was organized by Freedom 250, a public-private partnership backed by the White House. Congressional Democrats have questioned the nonprofit's structure and finances, which they see as a Trump-controlled end run around a separate commission charted by Congress a decade ago to prepare semiquincentennial events.

Progressive groups planned counterprogramming. Among them were the Freedom From Religion Foundation, which advocates a strict separation of church and state, and the Christian group Faithful America.

On Thursday evening, the Interfaith Alliance projected protest slogans onto an exterior wall of the National Gallery of Art. "Democracy not theocracy," said one. Another said: "The separation of church and state is good for both."

This story appears in the **USA 250** feature series. View the full series.