

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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February 27, 2020

SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:

Jay.steagall@okhouse.gov

The Honorable Jay Steagall
Oklahoma State Legislature Representative
2300 N. Lincoln Blvd.
Room 453.1
Oklahoma City, OK 73105

Re: Correcting ahistorical statements on church/state separation

Dear Representative Steagall:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to your incorrect remarks regarding the history of American secularism. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 30,000 members across the country, including members in Oklahoma. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

You recently argued in favor of H.B. 3817, placing the phrase “In God We Trust” on all state buildings, reportedly because you allege “Our government is based on the idea that our inalienable rights are granted to us by our creator. . . . It is impossible to separate church from state. And our founders said we should not do that, actually.”¹ You reportedly argued that “the proof . . . was on the money in everyone’s pockets and purses.”²

This is wrong on all counts and shows an embarrassing lack of historical knowledge for a state representative.

“In God We Trust” did not become the national motto until 1956. The phrase was also added to paper money in the 1950s—as well as the insertion of “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance—all as part of the “Red Scare,” in an attempt to unify

¹ Randy Krehbiel, *Separation of church and state is impossible, ‘In God We Trust’ proponent tells Oklahoma lawmakers*, Tulsa World (Feb. 25, 2020).

² *Id.*

the country under a religious banner to oppose the perceived threat of “godless” communists. These efforts, undertaken more than 150 years after the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights were ratified, were and are antithetical to the founders’ adamant intent that the United States maintain a secular government in order to protect religious freedom in a pluralistic society. Pointing to the actions of theocratic politicians in the 1950s as “proof” of the intent of 18th century founders is nonsensical.

The only contemporary historical support you tried to point to for your position is the phrase “endowed by their Creator” in the Declaration of Independence. This reliance, too, is deeply misguided.

First, the Declaration of Independence is a list of grievances, not the basis of our government. The basis of our government is the U.S. Constitution, which is devoid of any reference to religion other than the deliberate *exclusion* of religion from the government in both Art. VI and the First Amendment.

Second, the founding father who wrote the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, also coined the phrase “separation between church and state” to explain the effect of the First Amendment’s religion clauses. You cannot revere the Declaration as a guiding document for America’s foundations while disregarding the same founder’s explanation of the nation’s actual founding documents.

Third, Jefferson’s draft of the Declaration did not even include the phrase “endowed by their Creator.” Rather, the phrase was edited into the document by a secondary author as a rhetorical flourish. Elsewhere in the Declaration—relying on “the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God”—and in writings before and after the Declaration, Jefferson rejected the idea of god-given rights.³

In short, your history is entirely backward. The unique idea of the founders was to ensure religious freedom by ensuring that state and church remain entirely separate, learning from the mistakes of centuries of theocracy in Europe. Neither 1950s anti-communist hysteria nor 18th century rhetoric change the fact that separating religion and government is not only a foundational American principle,

³ See Andrew L. Seidel, The Bill of Rights, Thomas Jefferson, and the danger of ‘God-given rights’, The Gazette (Dec. 15, 2017), *available at* https://gazette.com/news/the-bill-of-rights-thomas-jefferson-and-the-danger-of/article_0368de95-1ff7-5ba4-beff-d65114ff356f.html.

it is also an American original. Plastering the phrase “In God We Trust” on government property, by contrast, is patently un-American.

Finally, please remember that you represent *all* Oklahomans, of all religious beliefs and of none at all. Today, more than one-quarter of Americans, 26%, are religiously unaffiliated.⁴ Younger Americans are not just religiously unaffiliated, they are largely atheist or agnostic. A recent survey found that 21 percent of Americans born after 1999 are atheist or agnostic.⁵ Telling these Oklahomans that they should trust in a god that they do not believe in sends a message that they are outsiders in their own community. Please correct this misapprehension by showing that you support true religious liberty, which includes the right not to believe in any religion at all.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ryan D. Jayne". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "R" and "J".

Ryan D. Jayne
Staff Attorney

⁴ Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America’s Changing Religious Identity*, Public Religion Research Institute (Sept. 6, 2017), available at www.ppri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf.

⁵ *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, The Barna Group (Jan. 24, 2018), <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>.