

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 › MADISON, WI 53701 › (608) 256-8900 › WWW.FFRF.ORG

May 31, 2022

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: ltgov@ltgov.virginia.gov

The Honorable Winsome Sears
Office of the Lieutenant Governor
P.O. Box 1195
Richmond, VA 23218

Re: Your shocking and inappropriate remarks blaming godlessness for school shootings and suggesting prayer is the solution

Dear Lt. Gov. Sears:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) and our Virginia membership to object to your abhorrent recent comments blaming irreligiosity and lack of prayer for the horrific shooting that took place in Uvalde, Texas. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 37,000 members across the country, including more than 800 members in Virginia. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism. Our membership is comprised of atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, humanists and other nonbelievers.

Like you and the rest of the nation, we are appalled and saddened by the shooting at Robb Elementary School. We join others in decrying this senseless violence and in demanding *meaningful* reform to protect our school children — something you as lieutenant governor can help bring about.

It is our understanding that on May 27, 2022, you delivered a speech to the NRA Women's Leadership Forum blaming the shooting on a general breakdown of society that has come about "because we took prayer out of schools." You quoted from the bible:

Jer 31:15 tells us, "In Ramah, she hears the sound of sobbing, bitter weeping. Rachel mourns for her children but she refuses to be comforted because her children are no more." This time, we weep for the children of Robb Elementary School of Uvalde in this great state of Texas.

You then listed a variety of problems in our society, and stated the reason for these issues is:

Because we took prayer out of schools. We have so liberated our sexuality, that we are now informed that men can have abortions. This they say with straight faces, with certainty and arrogance, masquerading as indignation.

You concluded your speech:

We have a saying in church, I may not be what I'm supposed to be, but I ain't what I used to be. And that's America. Because, here I am, an immigrant, woman, Black, and yet, I am the Lieutenant Governor of the great Commonwealth of Virginia. I am 2nd in command of the former capital of the Confederacy. God has brought us a mighty long way. In fits and starts, she is getting there - America is getting there. As the Lord said, Rachel will weep no longer. There is hope for our future.

May God comfort those who mourn.
May God bless the United States of America.

The members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation believe that nothing fails like prayer. Prayer is the ultimate cop-out, the ultimate admission that the invoker is giving up, by transferring personal responsibility to an imaginary being. Your "solution" to the rampant epidemic of gun violence in our country, particularly in our schools, is that the government must push religion onto a captive audience of school children and other Americans to stop school shootings. But the evidence does not bear this out. (Students are already free to pray privately, read the bible in their free time, and even attend Christian clubs in public schools. More than 70 years of compelling Supreme Court precedent exists to protect the rights and freedom of conscience of children from school-sponsored and imposed prayers or indoctrination.)

Scientific studies¹ show that societies and states with less religion have less violence:

Murder rates are actually lower in more secular nations and higher in more religious nations where belief in God is deep and widespread. And within America, the states with the highest murder rates tend to be highly religious, such as Louisiana and Alabama, but the states with the lowest murder rates tend to be among the least religious in the country, such as Vermont and Oregon. Furthermore, although there are some notable exceptions, rates of most violent crimes tend to be lower in the less religious states and higher in the most religious

¹ In a synthesis of the latest social scientific research concerning some of these issues *see* Zuckerman, Phil. 2009. 'Atheism, Secularity, and Well-Being: How the Findings of Social Science Counter Negative Stereotypes and Assumptions.' *Sociology Compass*, Vol. 3 Issue 6, 949-971.

states. Finally, of the top 50 safest cities in the world, nearly all are in relatively nonreligious countries, and of the eight cities within the United States that make the safest-city list, nearly all are located in the least religious regions of the country.²

When any given factor of societal health or well-being is measured, invariably the *less* religious countries score better. The *least religious countries* of this world:

- Have the lowest rates of violent crime and homicide
- Are the best place to raise children and be a mother
- Have the lowest rates of corruption
- Have the lowest levels of intolerance against racial and ethnic minorities
- Score highest when it comes to women's rights and gender equality
- Have the greatest protection and enjoyment of political and civil liberties
- Are better at educating their youth in reading, math, and science
- Are the most peaceful and the most prosperous
- Have the highest quality of life.³

The pattern of lower religiosity to higher societal well-being also exists within the United States. Those states that are the most religious also have a high occurrence of societal ills.⁴ States that tend to be among the *most religious* in the nation have the highest rates of violent crime and murder.⁵

These studies do not prove that religion causes *all* of society's ills, but do reveal that Christianity and more faith or prayer are not a panacea and are actually counterproductive. As Thomas Paine said, "Accustom a people to believe that priests or any other class of men can forgive sins, and you will have sins in abundance."⁶

Many politicians cite the 1962 Supreme Court decision *Engel v. Vitale*, which ruled that school-sponsored prayers in public schools violate the First Amendment, as the point where we "removed God from schools," blaming this for school shootings ever since. In reality, there were school shootings before that case, and there was no spike in school shootings immediately following the ruling.

² Zuckerman at 955 (internal citations omitted).

³ Zuckerman at 960-61 (internal citations omitted).

⁴ States that tend to be among the *most religious* in the nation have the highest rates of poverty, obesity, infant mortality, STDs, teen pregnancy, as well as, the lowest percentage of college educated adults. Zuckerman at 955, 961 (internal citations omitted).

⁵ Zuckerman at 955, 961 (internal citations omitted)

⁶ Thomas Paine, A Letter to Camille Jordan (1797), in *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, (GP Putnam's Sons, 1896) IV:252. Available at <https://books.google.com/books?id=srpGH65Zl9kC&pg=PA252>

Furthermore, we hasten to observe that the biblical deity, which you imply would prevent mass shootings, is depicted as one of the greatest mass murderers⁷ in all literature.⁸ In 2 Chronicles alone, the villain of the Old Testament killed a million Ethiopians⁹ and half a million Israelites.¹⁰ That's in addition to destroying every human on earth, save eight,¹¹ razing entire cities,¹² and repeatedly committing and commanding genocide.¹³

School shootings are a real-world problem that requires a real-world solution, not a plea for nonexistent supernatural intervention. Atheists and agnostics and others unaffiliated with religion — who now comprise three-in-ten adult Americans at 29 percent of the population¹⁴ — are some of the most avid supporters of gun safety reform, while evangelical Christians are among the least.¹⁵ In fact, 94 percent of FFRF's members support stricter gun safety laws.¹⁶

As a lieutenant governor, your duty is to support the U.S. Constitution, which is godless and entirely secular, and to protect the rights of *all* Virginians regardless of their religious or non-religious beliefs. Your promotion of religion, prayer and Christianity as a false panacea for this crisis is insulting and demeaning to non-religious and non-Christian citizens. Young Americans are less religious than ever, with atheism doubling among Generation Z, and they are demanding real action to stop the school shooting epidemic. Rather than advocating for more prayer, we ask you to “Get off your knees and get to work!”

Very truly,



Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker
Co-presidents
Freedom From Religion Foundation

⁷ See unpleasantgod.ffrf.org/#/ (Check out in particular the links for bloodthirsty, ethnic cleanser, infanticidal, genocidal)

⁸ See, e.g., www.vocativ.com/news/309748/all-the-people-god-kills-in-the-bible/index.html.

⁹ 2 Chr. 14:12–13 (“The Lord smote the [thousand thousand] Ethiopians ... they were destroyed before the Lord”).

¹⁰ 2 Chr. 13:17 (“There fell down slain of Israel five hundred thousand chosen men”).

¹¹ Gen. 6:9–9:17.

¹² Gen. 18–19.

¹³ E.g. Deut. 20:16–18 (commanding his people to “not leave alive anything that breathes... completely destroy them ...”).

¹⁴ “About three-in-ten U.S. adults are religiously unaffiliated, Pew Research Center, Dec. 14, 2021

<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/#:~:text=Currently%2C%20about%20three%2Din%2D,asked%20about%20their%20religious%20identity>.

¹⁵ <https://religionnews.com/2019/08/29/which-religions-support-gun-control-in-the-us/>

¹⁶ <https://ffrf.org/news/news-releases/item/37966-ffrf-releases-major-secular-voter-poll-we-are-the-real-values-voters>