

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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February 4, 2013

The Honorable Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20500

Re: Nobody, including nonbelievers, ought to be barred by BSA

Dear Mr. President:

On behalf of our national membership of more than 19,000 freethinkers and families, we urge you to take this important opportunity to use your position as Honorary President of Boy Scouts of America, as well as your moral "bully pulpit" as President of the United States, to ensure that BSA's advertised invitation that "Any boy may join" is indeed honored, by advocating for *full* membership inclusion in Boy Scouts of America.

As we applaud the willingness of the national board of Boy Scouts of America to reconsider its hurtful blanket exclusion of gays from membership, we must not forget that BSA has embraced exclusion of two minorities in our nation: gays *and* nonbelievers. You have commendably written, "The Scouts are a great institution that are promoting young people and exposing them to opportunities and leadership that will serve people for the rest of their lives. And I think nobody should be barred from that."

You are right — *nobody* deserves to be barred from that, including nonbelievers. With Pew and other surveys showing that one in five Americans — and as many as one in three young people — identify as nonreligious, clearly millions of nontheistic families and their sons are being labeled as *persona non grata* by BSA. It is not and should not be socially acceptable to exclude either gays *or* atheists.

BSA has falsely advertised that "any boy may join" and has often relied upon and received major governmental favors. Starting in the 1970s, discrimination against atheists became common, then entrenched as BSA adopted a religious litmus test, forcing parents of boys interested in joining to sign a "Declaration of Religious Principles" returned with membership fees. The declaration states: "The Boy Scouts of America maintain that no member can grow into the best kind of citizen without recognizing his obligation to God."

BSA spokesperson Deron Smith publicly stated last week that a change in policy toward atheists is not being considered along with its change on gay membership, because "Duty to God" is one of BSA's basic principles. While it is true that BSA has been ruled to be a private club that may freely discriminate in its membership (however ugly that discrimination), it is unacceptable for our nation's highest executive office to be implicated even tacitly in lending moral support to

such prejudice. Religious litmus tests are improper in a fraternal organization with a congressional charter.

Mr. President, as the child of a mother who was humanistic and secular, you know that no one can grow into the best kind of citizen being encouraged to discriminate against children born into nonbelieving families. As Piaget and others have established, children under 12 cannot fully comprehend abstractions, are not mature enough or conversant enough with conflicting religious teachings to have made up their own minds about religious claims. You know what BSA does not comprehend: that it is not what you *believe* that makes you a good person, but what you *do*. Professing an orthodox belief in an unprovable deity has nothing to do with ethical conduct. A Scout from an atheist home can help that senior across the street, raise money for causes, and earn merit badges for volunteerism just as ably as a Scout from a religious home. Wrapping oneself in a mantle of piety is often counterproductive of moral action, as witnessed by the way in which “duty to God” has been used by BSA to justify its exclusion of gays and atheists. Scouts religious or nonreligious, gay or straight, can get along. Emphasis upon religious differences builds walls between children.

It is reprehensible that BSA places loyalty to dogma over loyalty to children, teenagers and volunteer leaders. It is ignoble that teenagers, parents and adult volunteers are being shunned for holding the intellectually respectable position that they require proof and evidence before accepting dogmatic claims. What John Stuart Mill noted in 1873 is still true today: “The world would be astonished if it knew how great a proportion of its brightest ornaments — of those most distinguished even in popular estimation for wisdom and virtue — are complete skeptics in religion.”

The denial of membership has personally harmed and stigmatized not only gay but nontheist families and Scouts. (Many gays are nonbelievers who would still, on that score, be unwelcome in BSA.) Below is a recap of only a few of many instances of ostracism and discrimination on the basis of religion practiced in recent decades by local and national BSA leaders:

- Stripping model Boy Scout Darrell Lambert of Oregon of his Eagle Scout badge in 2002 because he is an atheist. Darrell was a Scouting and community volunteer who had won first place in his state athletic medicine competitions and volunteered as a search and rescue worker. He was singled out for his atheism by his district commissioner, who told the class an atheist cannot be a good citizen.
- Denying 6-year-old Mark Welsh of suburban Chicago of the right to join Tiger Cubs, after being solicited through his public school. When his father encountered the Declaration of Religious Principles and explained to BSA officials he could not in good conscience sign it, Mark was told he was an undesirable candidate and left the sign-up meeting in tears. Welsh’s lawsuit under the Civil Rights Act was lost to BSA, which has vigorously defended its exclusionary policies in many court battles, including its exclusion of gays in a Supreme Court test.

- Twins William and Michael Randall were expelled with no warning from the Orange County Cub Scout pack despite three years of Scouting experience. The BSA appealed the Randalls' challenge under the California Unruh Civil Rights Act and won the right to expel the twins. An agnostic den leader who sent a supportive letter to the Randalls was expelled, a common practice against those within BSA who have protested bigotry at the national level.

BSA has deserved a badge of dishonor for its discriminatory practices. It is encouraging that BSA is taking its first steps toward more egalitarian practices, but it is equally important to point out that BSA's proposals do not go far enough.

We urge you to use your position as honorary president of BSA to lead the way toward an America "with liberty and justice for all."

May we hear from you at your earliest convenience?

Very truly

Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker