

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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August 29, 2019

## SENT VIA U.S. MAIL

The Vice President  
The White House  
Office of the Vice President  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Re: Correcting the Record on Religious Symbols in VA Facilities

Dear Mr. Vice President:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, a nationwide nonprofit dedicated to fighting Christian Nationalism and its push to undermine the religious freedoms of all Americans, including the more than 110 million who either practice a minority religion or no religion at all. We are writing to correct the record regarding the misleading statements you made yesterday at the American Legion National Convention.

In your August 28 speech to the American Legion National Convention at the Indiana Convention Center, you made several misstatements and errors. In particular, we wish to correct those errors in the remarks you thought were significant enough to tweet out. You said:

[T]his administration will *always* make room for the spiritual needs of our heroes at the VA as well. You might've heard even today that there's a lawsuit to remove a bible that was carried in World War II from a missing man table at a VA hospital in New Hampshire. There's a lawsuit underway. It's really no surprise because under the last administration, VA hospitals were removing bibles, and even banning Christmas carols in an effort to be politically correct. But let me be clear: under this administration VA hospitals will not be religion-free zones. We will always respect the freedom of religion of every veteran of every faith, and my message to the New Hampshire VA Hospital is: the bible stays!

You tweeted a video clip of those remarks and wrote, "During the last Administration the VA was removing Bibles & even banning Christmas carols to be politically correct, but under President @realDonaldTrump, VA hospitals will NOT be religion-free zones. Message to the New Hampshire VA: the Bible STAYS!"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://twitter.com/mike\\_pence/status/1166886007352057857](https://twitter.com/mike_pence/status/1166886007352057857)

The first problem is that you misrepresented that lawsuit. An Air Force veteran is suing to remove a bible from the POW/MIA table at the Manchester VA Medical Center in New Hampshire. In the lawsuit itself, the veteran explains that he is “a devout Christian,” and “as a Christian, he respects and loves all his military brothers and sisters and does not want to be exclusionary by the placement of the Christian Bible.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, this is not an anti-Christian attack as you intimated in your speech. It’s simply one patriot’s admirable attempt to uphold the Constitution, aided by the Military Religious Freedom Foundation.

Second, the tradition of POW/MIA tables was started by Vietnam combat pilots as a memorial to *all* who have served, regardless of religious belief, and did not contain a bible. Adding a bible to the memorial excludes non-Christian veterans from that memory; it denigrates their service and alienates them from their military family. Like the traditional displays, the original POW/MIA table at the Manchester VAMC did not contain a bible; it was added later. The VA has secured a special place of prominence for this bible while denying other religious groups equal opportunity to place their own texts on the table. To defend the Manchester VAMC’s actions is to defend Christian privilege, not religious freedom.

Third, contrary to your claims, the previous administration did not ban Christmas carols. We imagine that you’re referring to a claim that the VA linked in its press release announcing its new policy on religious displays. Rather than linking to an actual news source, the VA linked to a Todd Starnes *Fox News* editorial from 2014.<sup>3</sup>

That op-ed, which is not a news story written by a journalist, is like most of Starnes’s other writing: heavy on conservative talking points, light on facts, and unconcerned with truth. In reality, a VA Center in Augusta, Georgia asked high school carolers not to sing religious or sectarian Christmas carols *in the public areas of the hospital*. However, they were allowed to sing secular Christmas carols in public areas. The hospital also said it would provide private areas for groups to sing religious carols to veterans who chose to hear them.

In other words, this was about respecting the religion of every veteran by not using the VA to impose one particular religion on everyone regardless of their personal religious views. This is exactly how our government should react in such a situation. This VA hospital should be commended; instead, you distort the hospital’s honorable intentions in an effort to fearmonger and peddle a Christian persecution narrative that is demonstrably false.

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<sup>2</sup> Complaint available at <https://www.militaryreligiousfreedom.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Final-Complaint-5.6.19.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Todd Starnes, “Lawmakers accuse VA of disrespecting Christians,” January 6, 2014, *Fox News*, opinion, at <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/lawmakers-accuse-va-of-disrespecting-christians>.

Finally, the VA policy that you complained about was most recently revised in July 2008, well before President Obama entered office. This is such a common Christian Nationalist talking point that it has been debunked by *Snopes*.<sup>4</sup> You repeated something that Snopes debunked in January of 2015. Either you are knowingly spreading falsehoods, or you should fire your speechwriter.

The VA's 2008 policy reflects the mandates of our godless Constitution. VA hospitals are not, and never have been, "religion-free zones," as you claimed. Veterans are free to practice their own religions in their own ways and the VA respects that freedom by not endorsing any religion. The 2008 policy drew the line in the correct place, but even the new policy states that passive displays should respect and tolerate differing views and should not elevate one belief system over others. The bible display at the Manchester VAMC even fails under this newly watered-down policy, because it elevates Christianity above all other belief systems.

What you fail to grasp — or perhaps deliberately choose to ignore — is that nobody is seeking "religion free" zones anywhere. Ensuring that the machinery of the state, including VA hospitals, does not promote religion is mandated by the Constitution. It also guarantees that the government is not coercing or pressuring citizens into religious worship or discriminating against them because of their religious views. In other words, a government that is free *from* religion guarantees our veterans the freedom *of* religion.

Even if all your "alternative facts" were *actual* facts, no Christian is prevented from the free exercise of their religion when a bible is not displayed on a public table or religious carols are not sung in a public space. Those Christians can still read their bible and hear those carols, it's just that the VA is not imposing the bible and carols on everyone else. Sadly, it seems that the lack of imposition, which is required by our Constitution, is precisely what upsets you. And for that, you should be ashamed.

Sincerely,



Andrew L. Seidel  
Director of Strategic Response

ALS:jme

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/stowing-through-the-chapel/>