

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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## SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL

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Dr. Mark T. Esper  
Secretary of Defense  
U.S. Department of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301-1000

General John W. Raymond  
First Chief of Space Operations  
Air Force Space Command  
150 Vandenberg St., Ste 1105  
Peterson AFB, CO 80914-4500

Re: U.S. Space Force designating, blessing its own King James Bible

Dear Secretary Esper and General Raymond:

We are writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to object to the U.S. Space Force designating and blessing its own King James Bible for ceremonies. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 30,000 members across the country who object to entangling religion with government. One quarter of our members are active-duty military or veterans. FFRF works to protect the constitutional separation between state and church, and to educate about nontheism.

It has been reported that “Religious leaders blessed a King James Bible at Washington National Cathedral on Sunday to be used by the newly formed United States Space Force, including for swearing-in ceremonies.”<sup>1</sup> High-ranking service members attended the ceremony, which blessed the King James Bible: “May this Bible guard and guide all those who purpose that the final frontier be a place where God will triumph over evil, where love will triumph over hate, and where life will triumph over death.” We understand that the Museum of the Bible, which has been heavily criticized for transparent proselytizing and poor history and scholarship,<sup>2</sup> donated the bible. In short, as others reported: “The U.S. Space Force has designated its own King James Bible for swearing-in ceremonies.”<sup>3</sup>

Selecting one “holy book” as the official “holy book” of a governmental branch is improper and an egregious violation of the Establishment Clause, which prohibits government speech or action endorsing religion.

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<sup>1</sup> Katherine Shaver, *Washington National Cathedral dedicates Bible for newly formed U.S. Space Force*, The Washington Post (Jan. 12, 2020), available at <https://wapo.st/2tghSzn>

<sup>2</sup> Peggy McGlone, *Will money from conservative Christians sway Bible museum's professed mission?*, The Washington Post (Nov. 2, 2017), available at <https://wapo.st/2FKxHki>. See also <http://bit.ly/2QRD1bW>; <https://abcn.ws/30fZOkS>.

<sup>3</sup> Oriana Pawlyk, *Group to Fight Space Force's Use of Bible for Swearing-In Ceremonies*, Military.com (Jan. 13, 2020), available at <http://bit.ly/35R3URR>.

The oath that Space Force commanders will take is a solemn promise to defend not the bible but our Constitution, with their lives if necessary. That Constitution, which founded this great nation, is a godless document whose only references to religion are exclusionary, such as Article VI promising “no religious test shall ever be required” for public office.

Like the Constitution itself, the only oath provided for in the Constitution is godless. The presidential oath in Article II does not include the words “So help me God,” rather prescribing as an oath or affirmation these words: “I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.” The modern tradition of presidents appending “So help me God” didn’t start until World War I.<sup>4</sup> Nor is there any mention in the Constitution of placing a hand on a bible. It is our understanding that most service members do not actually use a bible when swearing their oath. *See, e.g.*, 10 U.S.C. § 502. They’re in good company: Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Pierce, and John Quincy Adams took their presidential oaths without a religious text.

Our government cannot force an individual to “profess a belief or disbelief in any religion.” *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15 (1947). At the same time, as the Supreme Court has said, the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, “at the very least, prohibits government from *appearing to take a position on questions of religious belief...*” *Cty. of Allegheny v. Am. Civil Liberties Union*, 492 U.S. 573, 594 (1989) (emphasis added). If some commanders insist on taking their oath on a bible they provide, that might be their prerogative. However, it is not appropriate for the U.S. military to endorse, select or provide a bible for that ceremony, or suggest, coerce or force every commander to swear on it or otherwise utilize it as part of their military role.

The Space Force has reportedly selected and singled out not just the Christian bible, but a Protestant version — the King James Bible. This is not the version subscribed to by Jews, Mormons or even Roman Catholics. Religion is inherently divisive, which is why the government must remain neutral. In the 1840s in Philadelphia, Protestants and Catholics rioted over which version of the bible ought to be read in public schools. Catholics argued that the state had no power to tell children to read the King James Version and the Protestant majority was incensed. All told, some 20 people were killed, another five dozen injured, hundreds fled their homes, and churches were burned down.<sup>5</sup>

The decision to select and honor one particular religion’s holy book in this manner excludes and alienates every nonreligious service member. More than one-quarter of Americans, 26 percent, are religiously unaffiliated and another six percent are non-Christians practicing a minority religion.<sup>6</sup> Younger Americans are not only

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew L. Seidel, *The Founding Myth*, 255–56 (Sterling Publishing, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Russell Frank Weigley, *Philadelphia: A 300 Year History*, 357 (W. W. Norton & Company, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> Robert P. Jones & Daniel Cox, *America’s Changing Religious Identity*, Public Religion Research Institute (Sept. 6, 2017), available at [www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf](http://www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf).

less apt to be religiously unaffiliated, many are atheist or agnostic. A recent survey found that 21 percent of Americans born after 1999 identify as atheist or agnostic.<sup>7</sup> Those numbers have increased rapidly over the last eight years, presumably for the military as well. But even eight years<sup>8</sup> ago, 23.4% of all military personnel identified as atheist, agnostic, or nonreligious.

To many Americans who are nonbelievers, the bible contains violent, homophobic, sexist and racist models of behavior that they find personally repugnant, and which potentially could encourage persons who rely on them to act in a manner harmful toward nonbelievers and others. Thus, designating a so-called “holy book” for the Space Force would marginalize and implicitly disparage non-Christians and nonbelievers. Such actions would create a hostile environment for nonbelievers and non-Christians, who would be denied their constitutional right to an environment free of official government endorsement of religion in general, and endorsement of Christianity in particular. The blessing and announcement of the King James Bible sends a message to citizens that Protestant Christian beliefs are more legitimate in the eyes of the state than other systems of belief and thought, which constitute matters of individual free conscience. The hostile environment would derive from governmental endorsement of an inherently religious message that is deliberately intended to emphasize and encourage the integration of Christianity into the offices of the Space Force.

Nonreligious service members who, for instance, swear on the Constitution, to uphold the Constitution are now second-class members of the Space Force, as would be any believer who chose to swear on their own version of a holy book, rather than the Space Force-approved holy text. That is the problem: this new branch of the U.S. military has clearly expressed favoritism not just for religion over nonreligion, but for one particular holy book over every other. That is unconstitutional and must be undone.

Sincerely,



Annie Laurie Gaylor & Dan Barker

Co-presidents

ALG/DB:als

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<sup>7</sup> *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, The Barna Group (Jan. 24, 2018), <http://bit.ly/36MmxYi>.

<sup>8</sup> See MAAF Department of Defense Religious Preference and Chaplain Support Study (July 2012), available at <http://militaryatheists.org/demographics/>.