

Military Religious Freedom Foundation

Albuquerque, NM 87123

August 18, 2023

The Hon. Bob Casey
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Casey:

The two of us who signed this letter are members of the Advisory Board of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF). Both of us are retired from the United States Army with the rank of Colonel. Larry Wilkerson served thirty years in the Army and finished his career as Chief of Staff to General/Chairman of the Joint Chiefs/Secretary of State Colin Powell. James Currie served thirty years, active and reserve, in the Army and was for eighteen years Professor of National Security Studies at the Defense Department's National Defense University. He was also a staffer for Senator Lloyd Bentsen (D-TX).

We are writing to you in specific response to your recent letter to one of your constituents, who contacted you about the language in the "Turner Amendment," which the House of Representatives made into Section 1045 of its version of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). Your constituent forwarded your letter to us. Because the Senate has no such provision in its version of the NDAA, this section will be an item of discussion when the House and Senate Armed Services Committees meet in conference to work out the differences between the two bills. The Turner Amendment strikes a devastating blow at religious freedom in the US military by forbidding anyone in the Defense Department—this would of course, include anyone in the military services—from responding to a request from the MRFF for relief for any military servicemember who had contacted MRFF and asked for its assistance in protecting their religious freedom and beliefs, a principle in which we know you strongly believe.

Let us start by describing the MRFF, as you may not know its origin and its work. The MRFF was founded almost twenty years ago as a non-profit organization dedicated to defending and protecting at no cost to the recipients of its assistance the rights of military servicemembers as they are guaranteed in the First Amendment to the US Constitution. In accordance with this Amendment, military servicemembers are free to practice their religious beliefs without coercion or proselytizing from those above them in the military chain of command. Unfortunately, some individuals—a minority, but nevertheless a significant number—in that chain of command have concluded that their rank and position give them the right to dictate to those under them what they should believe and how they should express their religious beliefs. As a result, more than 84,000 individual servicemembers have reached out to the MRFF over the years and asked for its help in protecting and defending their First Amendment rights. As you suggest in your letter to Ms. *(name withheld)*, these actions by MRFF have led some individuals and organizations to "take exception to the views and tactics of the MRFF." Indeed, they do, and we wear such

“exception” as a badge of honor, regarding it as strong testimony and proof of the effectiveness of the actions of the MRFF.

Some such individuals are undoubtedly identifiable as “Christian Nationalists,” a misnomer if there ever were one, because these people are in no way either Christian or Nationalist. They are, instead, small-minded religious bigots who would violate the Constitution by imposing their own version of religion on men and women who have taken an oath to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic” and who proudly wear their military uniform while doing so. For the record, ninety-five percent of servicemembers who have come to the MRFF for assistance self-identify as Christian. The other five percent identify themselves as Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, other religions, or of no religion. Under our First Amendment, as you so well understand, they are all entitled to do so.

You state so eloquently in your reply to your constituent that, “The inclusion and equal treatment of all religions in the U.S. military provides our service members with a deeper understanding of the different lived experiences of their fellow Americans and communities abroad, ultimately enhancing our armed forces' ability to identify and address national security challenges. This Nation was founded on the principles of freedom and equality, not for some, but for all. As a society and a government, we must continue to move toward the ideal of inclusion.” The MRFF totally embraces and endorses these sentiments, and we emphasize to you that adoption of the Turner Amendment would essentially prevent the MRFF from defending those rights that are being encroached upon by certain people in the military hierarchy. We ask, Senator Casey, that you do more than keep your constituent’s “views in mind” when the Senate considers the NDAA. We ask that you make a particular point of standing up for the First Amendment rights of those who serve our country in uniform by taking a public stance against the Turner Amendment and its attack on the religious freedom of those in the US military. We thank you for considering our position and request.

Sincerely,

Larry Wilkerson

Larry Wilkerson
Colonel, US Army (Ret.)
Board of Advisors
Military Religious Freedom Foundation

James T. Currie

James T. Currie
Colonel, US Army (Ret.)
Board of Advisors
Military Religious Freedom Foundation.