

April 11, 2016

The Honorable Robert McDonald
Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave.
Washington, DC 20420

Re: Removal of Bible from Missing Man Table at Akron and Youngstown OH Veterans Administration (VA) Clinics

Dear Secretary McDonald:

We, the undersigned individuals and organizations, write to express our concerns about the removal of a Bible from the “Missing Man” Table at the Akron, Ohio, VA Clinic and at another Ohio VA facility. The “Missing Man” Table was established during the Vietnam Era to honor those who were Prisoners of War or Missing in Action. It has become a hallowed tradition that is respected by members of the military, veterans and their families.

A Bible has become a key feature of modern “Missing Man” displays. The National League of POW/MIA Families notes that the Bible is now typically included, and “represents the strength gained through faith to sustain us and those lost from our country, founded as one nation under God.”¹ The removal of the Bible not only violates the integrity of these display, but insults those returned POWS who gained daily strength from their faith in the prisons of our enemies. When a governmental agency such as the VA removes any part of the display, it is a grave insult to the nation’s veterans who often gather together to honor those who have not returned, while also interfering with the message being expressed.

The Akron VA’s action clearly represents a government intrusion into the religious and expressive rights of the staff and patients at the VA facility. Unfortunately, this unacceptable event was followed by a repeat performance at a second Ohio VA facility located in Youngstown.² These two incidents appear to be impermissibly placing a secular worldview above that perspective which lies at the heart of the “Missing Man” memorials – one which rests, in part, upon our national tradition of honoring God and

¹ National League of POW/MIA Families, “Missing Man Table and Honors Ceremony,” <http://www.pow-miafamilies.org/events/recognition-day/missing-man-honors-ceremony/>, accessed 3/31/16; see also, Larry Shaughnessy, “POW/MIA Day Brings Somber Ceremony, One Quietly Symbolic Tradition,” <http://www.cnn.com/2011/US/09/15/pentagon.pow.mia/index.html>, September 16, 2011.

² Bryant Jordan, “Ohio VA Clinic Swaps Bible for ‘Prop’ Book after Complaint” Military.com, http://www.military.com/daily-news/2016/04/06/ohio-va-clinic-swaps-bible-for-prop-book-after-complaint.html#discuss_thread, April 6, 2016. Now an Air Force Base in Ohio seems swept up in this contagion. See Phillip Swartz, “Wright-Patterson AFB Removes Bible from POW/MIA Display after Complaint,” *Air Force Times*, <http://www.airforcetimes.com/story/military/2016/04/09/wright-patterson-afb-removes-bible-powmia-display-after-complaint/82804162/>, April 9, 2016.

Country. A Bible resting passively along with the other traditional elements of the display does not promote any single religion. The removal of this traditional symbol, however, acts to curtail the religious expression of American citizens. It is not the role of government to modify or delete the ceremonial display of private groups such as the National League of POW/MIA families as embraced by veterans throughout the country.

Please recall that our country was founded, in part, upon the realization that all people are endowed with God-given rights that include free expression and freedom of religion. The unlawful actions of the Akron and Youngstown VA Clinics are a direct attack upon them. Such steps not only impermissibly involve the government in religious matters, but they employ governmental power to curtail religious expression and beliefs. This type of interference with our religious and expressive rights is strictly prohibited by the First Amendment to the Constitution and by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

We would appreciate it if you would take the time to clarify the situation at the Akron and Youngstown VA Clinics for us. Given the publicity surrounding these unfortunate incidents, we believe that several members of Congress also have an interest. Consequently, we look forward to your response.

We are confident you will agree that the freedoms of expression and speech, to include religious expression, are among our most cherished freedoms. Please note the roughly 64,000 signatures we have obtained on the included petitions expressing disapproval of the Akron VA's actions alone. We wish to work with you to ensure that these rights are protected within the VA system.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Lt. General (Ret.) William Boykin
Executive Vice President
Family Research Council



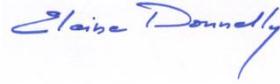
MG Paul E. Vallely (US Army-Ret.)
Chairman and CEO
Stand Up America US



John B. Wells, Commander, USN, Ret.
Executive Director
Military-Veterans Advocacy, Inc.



CH (COL) Ronald A Crews, USA, Ret.
Executive Director
Chaplain Alliance for Religious Liberty



Elaine Donnelly
President
Center for Military Readiness



Thomas P. Kilgannon
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Freedom Alliance



Tim Wildmon
President
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Mike Berry
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First Liberty Institute



Mathew Staver
President and Chief Counsel
Liberty Counsel



James A. Lyons, Jr., Admiral USN, Ret.
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Daniel Briggs
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Thomas Fitton
President
Judicial Watch



Arthur A. Schulez, Sr.
Exec. Director & General Counsel
International Conference of
Evangelical Chaplain Endorsers



Sandy Rios
Director of Governmental Affairs
American Family Association



Peggy Dau
International Civil Rights Activist

Enclosure(s)

cc: Senator Johnny Isakson, Chairman, Senate Veterans Affairs Committee
Hon. Jeff Miller, Chairman, House Veterans Affairs Committee